

A NICHOLAS COLT THRILLER



BLOOD TATTOO



J U D E H A R D I N

About BLOOD TATTOO

Nicholas Colt...

World-class guitarist with a crushed hand, private investigator with a revoked license. Currently settling into a nice quiet life of teaching music and spending time with his family. Or so he thinks.

Diana Dawkins...

Operative with the ultra-clandestine federal agency called The Circle. Smart, beautiful, deadly. She needs Colt's help, and she's willing to pay him well for it.

The bad guys...

Conspirators, traitors, assassins. Well-equipped and organized, they will stop at nothing to get what they want.

And what they want will affect the lives of millions.

Will Nicholas Colt and Diana Dawkins be able to stop them in time?

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A NICHOLAS COLT THRILLER

JUDE HARDIN

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE	
CHAPTER TWO	
CHAPTER THREE	
CHAPTER FOUR	
CHAPTER FIVE	
CHAPTER SIX	
CHAPTER SEVEN	
CHAPTER EIGHT	
CHAPTER NINE	
CHAPTER TEN	
CHAPTER ELEVEN	
CHAPTER TWELVE	
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	
CHAPTER NINETEEN	
CHAPTER TWENTY	
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN	
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT	
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE	
CHAPTER THIRTY	
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE	
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO	
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE	
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR	
Excerpt: SYCAMORE BLUFF	

CHAPTER ONE

The blast came from behind, violently jarring me out of my trance. My breath caught and my heart pounded, but I didn't realize the full gravity of the situation until a split second later when I saw the blood splatters on the wall. I looked down at the wound, and for some reason all I could think about was that first phone call two weeks ago...

Two weeks ago everything was improving.

Or so I thought.

I was chopping an onion while Juliet stood by the stove watching a chunk of butter melt in a skillet.

"What else should we put in our omelet?" she said.

Her voice was pleasant, maybe even a little playful. We were getting along better than we had in a while.

"Cheese and onions are enough," I said.

"How about some mushrooms?"

"Okay."

"How about some spinach?"

"Now you're going to ruin it."

She laughed. She knew how much I hated spinach. She lifted the skillet and tilted it side-to-side.

I'd married a beautiful woman. Juliet had turned forty-two on her last birthday, but she looked at least ten years younger than that. She was half American and half Filipino, and every time she smiled at me with those big brown eyes my heart melted like the butter in the pan.

"Next you'll be wanting to fry the eggs in *olive oil* or something," I said.

"Just chop your onion," she said. "You know, it wouldn't hurt you to try to eat a little healthier. And what's taking you so long over there, anyway?"

I glanced up at her. "You know I'm all thumbs with this kind of thing."

"You better watch what you're doing, or you're going to be *no* thumbs with that kind of thing."

"Sorry, but you're a lot prettier than this onion," I said. "And you smell better."

"Gee, thanks."

Nicholas Colt: world class guitarist with a crippled hand, ace detective with a revoked license, husband and father with a bad habit of opening his mouth. Juliet grew up in a different culture, speaking a different language, and she didn't always get my humor. She didn't

seem at all impressed that I considered her better looking than a root vegetable.

I tried to focus on the task at hand. When I turned the knife a certain way, I could see Juliet's distorted reflection in the shiny steel blade. She looked terrific, even with the funhouse dimensions.

I was still chopping the onion when I felt my cell phone vibrate in my pocket. I pulled the phone out and flipped it open, didn't recognize the incoming number. I was about to let it go to voice mail when Juliet said, "Give me the knife. Go ahead and take your call. You're just making a mess there anyway."

I smiled and set the knife on the cutting board. "Be my guest," I said.

I walked through the dining area and out to the back patio. It was only April, and it was only nine o'clock in the morning, but I guessed it must have been at least eighty-five degrees out there already. You could usually count on a decent breeze in north Florida this time of year, even thirty miles inland where we live, but today the air was like some sort of southern springtime syrup: thick and sticky and sweet, saturated with the steamy redolence of honeysuckle and juniper and freshly-mown grass.

And maybe just a hint of dog shit from the neighbor's Rottweiler.

I answered the phone.

"This is Colt," I said.

"Yes," a female voice said. "I saw your advertisement for guitar lessons, and I would like to sign up."

After a particularly harrowing time down in Key West last November, I'd decided to hang up my private investigator's hat and try teaching for a while. I'd tacked flyers on bulletin boards at several local music stores, and had gotten quite a few calls. So far I had twenty-nine students. They were keeping me busy, but I figured I could take on one more.

And thirty seemed like a nice round number.

"It's fifty dollars for one half-hour lesson a week," I said.

"That seems high."

"Do you know who I am?"

"No. Should I?"

"Ever hear of Colt Forty-Five? That was my band. I played lead guitar. We had quite a few hits back in the eighties."

Quite a few hits until our chartered jet went down in flames one day, killing my wife and our baby daughter and all the members of my band. I was the sole survivor, and twenty years later I discovered the crash wasn't an accident. Nicholas Colt wasn't exactly a household name anymore, and nobody recognized me these days, but most people in this part of the country had at least heard of me.

“Guess it was before my time,” she said.

I sighed. “All right. You still interested in lessons?”

“Yes.”

“I have openings on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“I need to start today,” she said. “I could meet you in thirty minutes.”

“I don’t work on Sundays. I usually don’t even answer the—”

“I’ll give you two hundred dollars for an hour of your time this morning, Mr. Colt. Otherwise, I’ll have to find someone else.”

“Why the big rush?” I said.

“I’ll explain when I see you.”

I didn’t know how a guitar lesson could possibly be so urgent, but if she wanted to throw some money around I wasn’t above taking it.

“What’s your name?” I said.

“Kaliope Pendergrass. Kaliope with a K.”

“Nice. I don’t think I’ve ever known a Kaliope, with a C or a K or any other letter of the alphabet.”

“My friends call me Kally. Kally with a Y.”

Kally with a *why*, I thought.

“I’m assuming you have an instrument,” I said.

“Of course.”

“Do you know where my studio is?”

“I do.”

“I’ll see you there in half an hour,” I said. “The clock starts ticking at ten.”

“See you there,” Kally said.

She hung up.

I walked inside. The house smelled like buttery eggs and onions. And coffee. I was starving.

“Breakfast is ready,” Juliet shouted.

I grabbed my keys from the dining room table and stepped into the kitchen. Juliet was sliding the omelet halves from the skillet onto plates. There was coffee and orange juice and buttered toast.

“You want the good news first or the bad news first?” I said.

“Where do you think you’re going with those keys?”

I told her.

“You sit down and eat with me,” she said. “Your new student can wait.”

“It’s two hundred dollars. For one hour’s work.”

“It’s Sunday, and you promised—”

“I know,” I said. “I’ll be back in a little while, and then we’ll have the rest of the day together.”

I heard something crash against the front door immediately after I walked out. My half of the omelet, I guessed.

Juliet had been on edge lately, for some reason. Maybe it was hormones. Or too much quality time together. Something. Anyway, along with everything else, she'd been nagging me constantly about my drinking habits.

You sure have been drinking a lot lately.

Don't you think you've had enough?

Nicholas, you drink too much!

And it wasn't even true. I never drank too much. I drank just enough. Every day.

My studio was in a strip mall with a supermarket and a Chinese takeout joint and a lawnmower repair shop. There was a thrift store and a hardware store and a vitamin shop, along with several places that had gone out of business. I pulled into the lot at 9:54.

The sign above my place said Nicholas Colt's Conservatory of Music. It was a nice sign. I'd paid a lot of money for it. I backed my 1996 GMC Jimmy into the parking place next to the community mailbox. I knew there wouldn't be any mail today, but I always grabbed that closest spot when I could.

I climbed out and stuck a key in the swinging glass door and walked inside. I punched a code into the keypad to shut off the alarm system.

The long and narrow space had once been an accountant's office. The tax people had cleared everything out when they left, which gave me a nice blank canvas to work with. There was a reception area in front with a computerized cash register on top of a glass display case. The case was filled with music books and other items a guitar player might need from time to time. Straps, cables, picks, strings, tuners, effects pedals. I was selling those things to the students at cost. Sort of like my version of a loss leader. I figured the deep discounts on accessories might keep them coming back for lessons. So far I was doing okay.

I'd positioned some steel and vinyl chairs beyond the reception area, where parents or other people waiting for students could sit and look at magazines. The chairs went mostly unused. People either headed to the supermarket next door or milled around in the other nearby shops while they waited. Or they walked around outside thumbing messages into their smart phones.

Beyond the waiting area there was a solid wall and a thick steel door that led to the studio proper. It was a ten-by-ten space, tightly soundproofed with fiberglass insulation and acoustic tiles. Quiet as a bank vault. Sometimes I went in there just to get away from the world for a while. There were two stools, two amplifiers, and a music stand. Everything I needed to guide my students toward improvement.

Kaliope Pendergrass walked in at exactly ten o'clock. I was standing behind the display case sorting flat picks.

“I’m Kally,” she said.

“Nicholas Colt.”

We shook hands. She was dressed in black pants and a sleeveless black top and black leather sneakers. I guessed her to be around five-six. Early thirties, slim and trim, dark brown hair. Leather shoulder bag, no jewelry. She had a pretty face and clear blue eyes.

She leaned over the counter and whispered: “I’m afraid I wasn’t quite honest with you on the phone earlier.”

“Where’s your guitar?” I said.

She gestured toward the studio door. “Can we talk in there?”

“Look, I was about to have breakfast with my wife when—”

She slapped a pair of hundred dollar bills on the counter.

“Can we talk in there?” she said again.

I picked the money up and shoved it into my pocket. She followed me into the studio room, and I shut the door behind us.

Two seconds later, I realized that I’d made a big mistake.

CHAPTER TWO

She grabbed my left hand and dug her thumb deeply into a pressure point. The hand had been crushed a couple of years ago on a job up in Tennessee. Six surgeries later, it still ached like crazy 24/7. It was the reason I couldn't play guitar nearly as well as I used to. It was the reason I didn't play in a band anymore, and it was one of the reasons I had decided to start teaching.

Kally with a Y had clamped the tip of her thumb directly over one of the surgical screws. My entire arm, up to the shoulder joint, felt as though someone had parked a tank on it.

I leaned forward and groaned in agony, and before I could do anything to defend myself she kneed me in the face and slammed me to the floor and cuffed my wrists with a nylon cable tie.

"What do you want?" I said.

"Be quiet."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a little black box. It was about the size of a deck of cards, and there was a collapsible antenna on one end. It looked like a miniature walkie-talkie. I knew what it was. It was an audio bug detector. I'd owned something similar back when my PI business was in full swing.

She swept all four corners of the studio with the device. Satisfied that nobody would be listening in on our conversation, she sat on one of the stools and crossed her legs.

"I'm sorry I had to put you down like that," she said. "But I have to be one hundred percent certain that nobody is watching us or listening to us."

"You could have just asked," I said.

"I could have, but you might have lied. Then I would have had to kill you."

She was speaking as though she'd pulled some dialogue from a really bad 1970s television script.

"What are you?" I said. "Some kind of ninja or something?"

"Or something," she said.

"Can you let me up now? Because, you know, this is just a wee bit uncomfortable."

"In a minute. After we chat."

I was baffled. She had given me two hundred dollars, and then she had assaulted me and tied me up. It didn't make sense.

"Who are you?" I said.

"Right now, I'm an inspector for the Department of Defense. I visit a variety of government contractors and make sure that their classified

documents are secure.”

“Like computer files and stuff?” I said.

“No, there are other agents who specialize in that side of it. I deal strictly with hard copies. I have to verify the content of the documents, and I have to verify that only a limited number of people have access to them.”

“I thought that was what security clearance was all about.”

“Clearance is only part of it,” she said. “You can have top security clearance, but that doesn’t mean you’re allowed access to all top security files. Access is granted on a need-to-know basis.”

“You said you’re an inspector for the Department of Defense *right now*,” I said. “What does that mean?”

“It means my profession changes on a regular basis, and only a handful of people know what I do the rest of the time.”

“And what is it that you do the rest of the time?” I said. “You know, besides beat up innocent guitar instructors.”

“I hunt vampires,” she said.

I kept waiting for the punch line, but it never came.

Vampires. That explained everything. Kaliope Pendergrass had obviously escaped from a psychiatric ward.

“You mean those deathly pale creatures that only come out at night?” I said. “Those bloodsucking fiends that shy away from garlic and mirrors and objects made from silver?”

She maintained her serious tone. “Of course not. In my organization, *vampire* is the code word for any person or group that intends to do harm to our country. Especially, but not strictly limited to, a man or a woman or a terrorist organization that intends to assassinate the president.”

“*The* president?” I said.

“Yes.”

The tortured delusions of a paranoid schizophrenic, I thought. I decided to play along. Maybe I could convince her to cut me loose. Then I could call for the guys in the white coats.

“So you work for the Secret Service?” I said.

“No. My organization is completely cloaked from the public eye, Mr. Colt. Imagine the CIA as the basement of a skyscraper. We’re the sealed chamber a hundred stories below that. Like I said, only a few people on the planet know what I do. Have you ever wondered why there aren’t more terrorist attacks and assassination attempts? We’re the reason why.”

“Isn’t that what Homeland Security and the Secret Service are for?”

“They put on a good show for the media. Most of the real work is done behind the scenes. By us.”

“What’s the name of your organization?” I said. I couldn’t wait to

hear what she came up with.

“You know the old cliché? I could tell you, but then I would have to kill you? Normally, that adage would apply. But you’re a very special case, Mr. Colt, and that’s why I feel comfortable passing this information on to you. But you can never, ever, tell anyone what I’m about to tell you now. You don’t even want to know what will happen to you and your family if you breach this confidence. Understand?”

“Yes. I understand.”

I was fascinated by the level of detail in her fantasy. She leaned over and whispered the fabricated name of the bogus organization into my ear.

“The Circle,” she said.

The name itself confirmed my suspicions: Kaliope Pendergrass was a level one nutjob.

“Okay,” I said. “So what do you want? I’m starting to get the impression you didn’t come in here for a guitar lesson.”

“I need your help,” she said. “I don’t know where else to turn.”

“What kind of help?”

“I inspected a government contractor the other day, and I came across a document outlining the exact time, date, and place that the president will be killed. *The* president, Mr. Colt. The document also named the individual responsible for the assassination. The vampire, if you will.”

“Yeah? Anybody I know?”

She took a deep breath. “It’s me, Mr. Colt. The assassin is me.”

CHAPTER THREE

She pulled out a knife and cut the cable tie binding my wrists. I sat up and rubbed the areas where the nylon strap had dug into my skin.

“You need help,” I said. “But not the kind I can give you. My wife’s a nurse. She can guide you toward the resources you need to—”

“I’m not mentally ill. I really am an inspector for the Department of Defense, and I really am a vampire hunter.”

“Prove it.”

She pulled a folding leather case the size of a wallet out of her bag and handed it to me. I opened it. There was a driver’s license on one side, and a laminated Department of Defense identification card on the other.

“Convinced?” she said.

“Who’s Diana Dawkins?”

“It’s the name most of the world knows me by. In fact, it’s the name you’ll be using from now on.”

Just when I was getting used to Kally.

I handed the wallet back.

“Looks official enough,” I said. “But just because you work for the DOD doesn’t mean you’re not insane. What about the other organization? The super-duper secret double-naught spy outfit that tracks down terrorists and assassins? The one I’m not allowed to mention?”

“Take your left shoe off,” she said.

This had gone far enough. I stood and reached into my pocket for my cell phone.

“I’m calling the cops,” I said. “If you want to skedaddle before they get here, go right ahead. I won’t try to detain you, but I don’t have time for this bullshit.”

She pulled a pistol out of her bag. She aimed it at my chest, and I heard the safety click off. My stomach tightened and my heart started hammering in my ears.

Crazy people with guns tend to make me nervous.

“Put the phone back in the pocket,” she said. “Have a seat.”

I put the phone back in the pocket and sat on the other stool, facing her. Once again, she instructed me to take my left shoe off. I took it off.

“Now what?” I said.

“The sock too.”

I took the sock off, tossed it aside.

“There you go,” I said. “It’s a pretty nice foot, as far as feet go. Size

twelve D. Now what else can I do for you this morning?"

She pulled a black and chrome disk out of her bag. It was about the size of a drink coaster. She thumbed the catch on one end, and it opened like a clamshell. It looked like an ordinary makeup compact, except an eerie blue light radiated from the powder reservoir. She handed it to me.

"Take the mirror and look between your fourth and fifth toes."

She had the gun, and she was totally off her rocker, so I figured I better do what she said. I spread my pinky toe away from the one next to it and used the mirror to look at the space between them. There was a crimson dot about the size of a pinhead located toward the underside of my foot, where only a contortionist could have seen it without a mirror.

"I never noticed it before," I said.

"You can only see it with the special light."

"What is it?"

"Let me have the light back," she said.

I returned the faux makeup compact. Diana took her left shoe off. She spread her toes, revealing an identical mark in the same anatomical location.

"We call it the blood tattoo," she said. "It's our way of positively identifying fellow members of the organization. Among other things."

"I'm not a member of anything," I said. "How did someone tattoo my foot without me knowing about it?"

"You're a potential recruit. There's a microchip under the mark, but yours hasn't been activated yet. It probably never will be. We have hundreds of potential recruits all over the world, and most of them will live to be a ripe old age without ever knowing."

"But how—"

"A few years ago, you were instrumental in bringing down the militant branch of a cult. The cult's leader was a vampire."

"He was out to kill the president?"

"He was an enemy of the United States. As was the leader of a second cell you came up against two years later in Tennessee. The Florida surgeon who has been working on your hand is one of us. He's responsible for your tattoo, and the microchip beneath it. Like I said, it can only be seen with the special light. It's a precise combination of frequencies developed by one of our laser specialists. The odds of anyone duplicating it exactly are about the same as randomly picking a predetermined star out of the sky."

"Now that I know it's there, what's stopping me from ripping that chip out of my foot and selling this story to a big news agency?"

"Nothing but your desire to keep living," she said. "And your belief in protecting the American way of life. And, of course, what I

mentioned earlier—that bad things will happen to your family if you ever share any information about the organization.”

After considering what she’d shown me, and everything she’d said, I decided she might not be nutso after all. At any rate, I felt violated. Unbeknownst to me, a surgeon had implanted an electronic device into my body and had marked it with a tiny tattoo that resembled a drop of blood. A tattoo that could only be seen under the glow of a special light. Maybe the conspiracy theorists had it right. Maybe Big Brother was watching all of us.

I didn’t want anything to do with Kaliopé Pendergrass, or Diana Dawkins, or whoever this strange young lady decided to be five minutes from now, and I didn’t want anything to do with any secret government organization. I just wanted to run my little studio and teach my students and have a cocktail or two every night. I didn’t want any trouble, but it seemed to have followed me once again.

“So what do you and your organization want from me?” I said.

“The organization doesn’t know I contacted you. This is just me. Actually, I took a huge risk by coming here and talking to you. They would kill me if they knew. But like I said, I didn’t know where else to turn.”

“Why me?”

“You were on my list of potential recruits, and after looking at a dozen or so profiles, you seemed like the most logical choice. You’ve been off the radar for a while, for one thing. You don’t have an employer to worry about, and you’ve done some really good investigative work in the past. Someone is setting me up, Mr. Colt. They’re trying to frame me, and I don’t know who I can trust. I don’t know how many people are in on it, maybe people in my own organization.”

“Call me Nicholas,” I said. “Tell me more about the document you found.”

“It was jammed into a book of schematics, a set of roadmaps for the electronics on a speaker system. The system is being designed for a new stealth fighter jet by a company called Aero-Fleck Audio. The schematics, and the pages detailing the assassination, were in a safe at the company I was inspecting. There it was, all in black and white. Who, what, when, where, and how. It was written in code, and I didn’t have time to decipher all of it, but the *who* was definitely one Diana Dawkins.”

“You couldn’t make a copy?”

“No. The document safe is in a small room, and there’s nothing else in there. A guard is always posted outside the door while I’m doing the inspection. I’m searched on the way in, and on the way out. I couldn’t make a copy, but I have a very good memory. And I have

extensive training in cryptology. I know exactly what most of the document said.”

“When is this assassination attempt supposed to take place?” I said.

“Friday, April twenty-seventh. Less than two weeks. The president is scheduled to deliver a commencement speech at the University of Florida in Gainesville, and from there his motorcade will travel to Jacksonville. The assassination attempt will take place somewhere along the president’s route, which will be determined immediately before departure.”

Brittney, my adopted daughter, was currently finishing up her sophomore year at UF. I remembered her mentioning that the president was going to be on campus. I hadn’t thought much about it at the time.

“Why don’t you just tell the president to stay home that day?” I said. “If he doesn’t come to Florida, then there won’t be an assassination attempt in Florida. They can’t blame you for something that didn’t happen.”

“The danger level is very high whenever he leaves the Whitehouse. That’s one of the reasons my organization exists. We can’t tell him to stay home every day, and that’s practically what it would amount to. Anyway, it’s imperative that I find out who is trying to set me up. Don’t worry. Nothing is really going to happen to the president. I’ll make sure of that. I’ll have my eye on the motorcade the whole time.”

“I saw a television show about the president’s armored limousine one time,” I said. “From the way they talked, it sounded as though the vehicle is practically impenetrable.”

“That’s correct.”

“So how is anyone supposed to—”

“I’m not sure yet,” she said.

“Someone obviously wanted you to find the document,” I said. “They planted it there knowing—”

“That’s the thing. Nobody knew about the inspection beforehand. We always come unannounced, and there are several inspectors in the rotation. There’s no way anyone could have known it was going to be me on that day.”

“How many people have access to the safe?”

“Supposedly, only five. The internal Contractor Program Security Officer, the project manager, two of the engineers, and the CEO of the company. They’re the only people with the combination, and the only people allowed to take documents in and out of the room.”

“So those are the people you would need to look at first,” I said.

“Right. And I need to get back into Aero-Fleck, under the guise of a repeat inspection, but I can’t do it myself. Protocol dictates that a different DOD employee must conduct any official visits following a

discrepancy.”

“And I’m guessing that’s where I come in.”

“Are you agreeing to work with me on this?” she said. “Because if you are, this is what I can do for you.”

She pulled out a pen and a Post-It pad. She wrote something down, peeled off one of the sticky notes, passed it over to me. There was a dollar sign followed by a three and five zeros. She was offering me three hundred thousand dollars to help her nail the culprits in what might turn out to be the most cunning and elaborate conspiracy in history. Three hundred grand.

It was tempting. I could expand my business with that kind of money. Maybe lease the vacant space where the video rental store had been. Maybe start selling guitars and other instruments. Maybe contract some people to offer piano lessons and drum lessons and trumpet lessons. Bassoon lessons, if there was a demand for it. Any instrument you could think of. That’s the kind of place I aspired to own. That’s why I named my business Nicholas Colt’s Conservatory of Music. I had big plans.

“Any chance of getting some of that money up front?” I said.

“Not going to happen. This is a work-for-hire situation, same as if I was contracting you to put a new roof on my house. If we’re successful, you will get paid. You’ll just have to trust me on that. I know it’s a gamble on your part, but that’s the way it has to be.”

I took a prolonged look at the Post-It, and then I looked Diana Dawkins directly in the eyes.

“What if I say no?” I said.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a plastic pill bottle. She held it up for me to see. The bottle was translucent yellow, and there was a single capsule resting inside. She gave it a rattle.

“This is a chemical compound created by extracting a specific enzyme from the pituitary gland of a specific animal. The formula itself is a closely guarded secret. Even I don’t know the animal or the enzyme that’s used to produce it. All I know is that it works. If you swallow this, you’ll fall asleep for a while. When you wake up, you won’t remember anything about me or the conversation we’ve had. This meeting, and the twenty-four hours or so preceding it, will be a complete blank.”

“What if I refuse to take the pill?”

“I have a shot I can give you instead. Same drug, but of course the shot goes directly into your bloodstream. Some people have experienced really nasty side effects from the injection. Believe me, you’re better off taking the pill.”

I took a deep breath.

“Can I have some time to think it over?” I said.

“No. There’s no time to spare. I have to know now. And Mr. Colt, let me make a few things perfectly clear. One: there might be some casualties before this is all over. Some people might have to die. In fact, it’s practically a guarantee. Two: once you commit, there’s no turning back. You’ll be in it for the duration of the job. And last but not least: if everything goes well, I might call on you again from time to time.”

“Why can’t I think it over? Why can’t I take the pill tomorrow if I want to?”

“It only works on short term memory. Tomorrow will be too late. I need a yes or no immediately.”

It was a lot of money, enough to get me where I wanted to go. Enough to open a big-time music store. My dream store. Opportunity was knocking, and at fifty-one years old I didn’t know how many more chances might come my way. If any. And, as much as I tried to deny it, I sometimes missed working as an investigator. Solving puzzles, saving innocent lives, defeating the bad guys. It was in my blood.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Diana Dawkins said she would be in touch.

That evening, Juliet and I sat on the couch eating popcorn and watching television. Naturally, she was curious about my new student.

"Why was she in such a hurry to have her first lesson?" she said.

"I don't know, really. But I figured it was worth skipping breakfast for two hundred bucks."

"She paid you in cash?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me, and I'll deposit it tomorrow on my way to work."

"I already spent it," I said.

"You already spent two hundred dollars today? On what?"

"It's a surprise."

"For me?"

"Maybe."

"Is it anything like the last surprise you gave me?" she said. "The new fishing pole?"

I laughed. "You didn't like your new rod and reel?"

"Maybe I would like it, if I ever got a chance to use it."

"It's all right. I've been testing it for you. It's a nice rig."

She punched my arm playfully.

"I'm serious," she said. "We never do anything together anymore. When will you take me fishing with you?"

"We could go early tomorrow morning," I said.

"I have to go see my home health patient tomorrow morning."

"You don't need to work two jobs anymore, Jules."

"It's just the one patient. And we're kind of like friends now. We go out to lunch sometimes. Anyway, she's getting better. Soon she won't need a nurse to come to her house. When that happens, I'll probably go ahead and resign from the home health agency and just work at the hospital."

"Okay. So how is it my fault that we don't do anything together anymore?"

"Did I say it was your fault?"

I got up and walked into the kitchen and fixed myself an Old Fitz on the rocks. I asked Juliet if she wanted anything, and she chose a soda. I opened the can and brought it in and handed it to her.

I sat back down beside her. We watched an old movie for a few minutes, and then she picked up the remote and started channel surfing. I hated it when she did that. It gave me a headache. I wished she would just pick something and watch it.

"I get tired of all this flipping around," I said. "Just find a channel and leave it there."

She got up and tossed the remote in my lap.

"Watch whatever you want," she said. "I'm going to bed."

She walked to the bedroom and slammed the door.

Which didn't surprise me, or worry me much. It had practically become a habit these days.

With Juliet out of the room now, I started thinking about everything that had happened earlier. I found a hand mirror and a flashlight and tried to find the spot between my toes, the blood tattoo, as Diana called it, but I couldn't see anything or feel anything under my skin.

It was there. I'd seen it with the special light. But it certainly wasn't detectable by any normal means. It freaked me out that the government could invade my body like that without my consent. I didn't like it, but there didn't seem to be anything I could do about it.

I sat there for a while and drank my drink and stared at the television, and then I decided to give Brittney a call. We talked for a few minutes, about nothing mostly. No big news on either end. Her classes were going fine, and I was getting along okay with the teaching studio. She had been studying for a test when I called, so I was about to let her get back to it when she brought up the subject of moving out of the dormitory and into an apartment in town.

"We've already been through this," I said. "We can't afford to rent you an apartment. You need to forget about that."

"I'll have two roommates, Dad. It won't cost any more than living in the dorm."

"What if one of the roommates bails on you? Or both of them?"

"They won't. All of our names will be on the lease, so—"

"And there are a lot of expenses when you live out on your own," I said. "Rent is only one of them."

"Then I'll get a job."

"I want you to spend at least one more year in the dorm. We'll talk about this apartment thing when you're a senior. How about that?"

"You're impossible, Dad. I have to go. Bye."

She hung up. I tried to call her back, but she wouldn't answer.

Brittney had been through some extremely traumatic events before we adopted her. She was still seeing a counselor once a week and seemed to be getting better, but she remained emotionally fragile at times. But then *all* nineteen-year-olds are emotionally fragile at times, so I tried not to worry about it too much. I just didn't like the idea of her living off campus. Not yet. The cost was only part of it. I was concerned about her safety more than anything.

I turned the volume down on the television, fixed myself another drink, opened my laptop and did a few searches. There were over a

million people in the United States named Diana Dawkins, and none named Kaliope Pendergrass. I figured all of her aliases were like that, either too ordinary or too unusual to be of any use. I found a website for a company called Aero-Fleck Audio, but the home page said *CURRENTLY UNDER CONSTRUCTION*. No help there. I clicked on a few of the conspiracy theory sites, but there was no mention anywhere of a secret government agency known as The Circle.

A few minutes after nine, I thought I heard something outside. A clanging noise, like someone rattling a box of pie tins. I got up and looked out the window, but I didn't see anything. I stepped out on the porch. It had rained, and the temperature had dropped considerably. It felt more like spring than it had earlier. I took a deep breath of the fresh, fragrant air. When I turned to walk back inside, a hand came from nowhere and covered my mouth.

I felt the cold edge of a knife blade against my neck.

"Don't say a word."

It was Diana Dawkins. I recognized her whisper, and her scent.

"We're going to take your car," she said. "Walk that way. You lead, and I'll follow."

I felt my pockets to make sure I had my keys and my wallet. I did. I stepped off the porch, heard Diana's footsteps fall in behind me as we traversed the sidewalk to the driveway.

I unlocked the driver's side door and took a seat behind the wheel. Slid the key into the ignition. Instead of sitting in the passenger's seat beside me, Diana climbed in back. I could see her in the rearview mirror. She was dressed all in black again, this time with wraparound sunglasses and a hooded sweatshirt. Her hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail, and there was a small backpack strapped to her shoulders.

"Where to?" I said.

"Just start the car and go."

"I've had a couple of drinks, so maybe—"

"Just start the car and go."

I started the car and backed out of the driveway.

"Why the knife?" I said.

"It got your attention, didn't it?"

"I guess you could say that. But I thought we were a team now. I thought I made it clear—"

"Sorry, Nicholas. In my business, you learn to trust nobody. And I mean nobody. If I ever seem doubtful about your sincerity, it's because I am."

"So how are we going to work together if we can't trust each other?"

"That's what I'm going to show you now."

She gave me directions as we went. All backroads, no streetlights, no businesses. We made a series of disorienting turns, and before long I started to doubt my ability to get back home on my own.

"Do you know where you're going?" I said.

"Of course. Take a left up here."

I took a left. A couple of minutes later, I noticed a set of headlights behind us. Maybe fifty yards.

"That idiot needs to turn his brights off," I said.

Diana turned around and looked out the back window.

"It's them," she said. "Speed up."

"What?"

"Go faster. Now!"

My GMC Jimmy has over two hundred thousand miles on it. Faded silver paint, missing hubcaps, bubbled tint. It's not much to look at, but I keep good tires on it and all the moving parts are well maintained. On any given day, if the occasion arose, I wouldn't hesitate to jump in it and fire it up and drive it from Florida to California. It has a big engine and four-wheel drive and it will flat-out move. When I stamped on the pedal, all of the 190 horses bottled up in the 4.3L Vortec reared their heads and lurched forward. The sudden acceleration pinned me to my seat, and the speedometer needle shot to a dollar in about four seconds.

"They're gaining on us," Diana said. "Go faster."

"What do you want me to do? I've got it floored."

But she was right. The headlights behind us were getting closer.

Diana was holding the same pistol she'd pointed at me earlier. She jacked a round into the chamber.

"Do you have a gun in the car?" she said.

I reached over and pulled my .45 out of the glovebox.

"Who are they?" I said.

"Don't worry about who they are. Just know that we're in grave danger. If they catch us, we're dead."

"If I'm going to shoot someone, I'd kind of like to know why."

"They are the enemy. That's all you need to know."

I've always found car chases kind of boring in the movies and on TV. How many hairpin turns can the ruggedly handsome detective come squealing and smoking out of before you start thinking about what you need at the grocery? The whole thing starts getting mundane after a while. Not so in real life. When you're really traveling at a hundred and twenty miles an hour, and you're not sure how much road you have left, your breathing gets shallow and your blood pressure skyrockets and every muscle in your body is tight as a fiddle string.

Despite the whiskey I'd consumed earlier, I was at a high level of

alertness. There was a prizefighter in my chest pummeling a speed bag, and the steady surge of adrenaline coursing through me had burned off any residual alcohol that might have been in its way.

We were on a two-lane in a rural area. No moon, and just enough starlight to see the blue-gray countryside whizzing by in a blur.

The car behind us crept closer and closer.

"Does this thing have four-wheel drive?" Diana said.

"Yeah."

"Pull off into that field over there."

"Through the ditch? The car has four-wheel drive, but it doesn't have a roll bar."

"Slow down and take it at an angle. It's our only chance."

I slowed down and switched on the 4WD. I veered into the roadside drainage ditch, which was mushy from the rain earlier. We tilted up on two wheels, and I thought for sure we were going to roll. But we didn't. At some point, Diana had scooted to the driver's side. She was sitting directly behind me now, and the balance tipped in our favor.

The Jimmy leveled out and plowed on through to the muddy field.

And that's where we got stuck.

CHAPTER FIVE

I gunned the engine in first gear and in reverse, trying to climb out of the mush, but it was no use. I couldn't even get the truck to rock. The tires just spun in place.

I looked back up to the road. The car that had been following us slowed down and then skidded to a stop. It was a black Mustang. One of the new Cobras. The driver eased forward, repositioned the car so that it was facing us. The blindingly bright headlights switched off. Two guys climbed out. It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust, but then I could see their silhouettes. They wore overcoats and fedoras, and they were holding what appeared to be automatic weapons.

Before I had a chance to say anything, I saw the muzzle flashes and heard the rat-a-tat-tats of their machineguns.

"Get out," Diana said.

I climbed over the center console and exited through the passenger's side door. Diana came out that side as well. She crouched behind the rear tires, and I did the same behind the front. We used the Jimmy for a shield, intermittently reaching around the fenders and returning fire with our pistols.

The bad guys had opened the doors to the Mustang and were standing behind them. I expected to hear at least some of our bullets pinging off the metal, but I never did. It might have had something to do with the fact that I was half deaf from my own gunfire.

More muzzle flash from the road, followed instantaneously by bullets thudding into the soggy ground in front of us.

"It's a good thing they can't aim very well," I said.

"It's dark," Diana said. "And the Uzis aren't very accurate from that distance."

"How do you know they're Uzis?"

"I can tell from the report. It's a distinctive pop."

"So what do we do now?"

"Wait. They have the advantage at the moment, and they're hoping to flush us out. We just have to be patient and wait for them to make the first move. Eventually they'll either have to come down here after us, or give up and drive away. If they come after us, we'll nail them with everything we have all at once. Okay? Don't hold back. Just keep pulling the trigger until you're out of rounds."

"I think I have seven left," I said.

"That should be plenty. I have two extra magazines, so I'll keep firing back occasionally while they're still up there on the embankment. Save your ammo for later."

“Okay.”

After several more bursts from the Uzis, and several more return blasts from Diana’s 9mm, everything got quiet. Eerily. Ominously. I was happy they hadn’t shot my windows out, or my tires. It might have been hard to explain that kind of damage to my insurance agent. Or to Juliet. The windows and tires were okay, but my poor old Jimmy wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon. It was hopelessly stuck in the furrowed earth. All four wheels up to the lug nuts.

We waited. Crickets singing, frogs croaking, mosquitoes biting. There was still snow on the ground in some parts of the country, but it was definitely springtime in Florida.

I was wearing shorts and a polo shirt and topsiders with no socks. It had gotten a little chilly, and I wished I had a jacket. I usually kept one in the backseat, a boar suede zip-up with Native American fringes accenting the yoke. It was a nice jacket. I wished I had it, but I had taken it to the cleaners the other day. I’d been to a party where they were smoking in the house, and I wanted to get the cigarette stench out of it. Now I was cold. Diana looked comfortable in her black hoodie and black fatigues and combat boots. She looked comfortable, and at that moment I wanted to choke her for getting me into this mess.

I felt some sort of insect crawling up my leg. I brushed it away. The Mustang’s doors were still open, but I couldn’t tell if the gunmen were still behind them or not. It made me nervous. Every couple of minutes I looked to the left and to the right and behind us, thinking they might be planning an ambush.

We waited another fifteen minutes, but nothing happened.

“Are they still up there?” I said.

Diana reached into her backpack and produced a pair of night vision binoculars. She pushed a button, and I heard a muted chirp as the electronics hummed to life.

“I don’t see them,” she said. “Maybe I got lucky and hit one of them. Or both of them. I’m going up there to take a look.”

She pulled a silky black mask out of her pocket, took the sunglasses off and pulled the mask over her head. She replaced the glasses and then pulled the hood up on her sweatshirt. Even from ten feet away, I could barely see her.

“I thought we were going to wait,” I said.

“We can’t wait forever. If they were going to do something, they would have done it by now. I think I got them.”

“Want me to come with you?” I said.

“No. I doubt if they’re still alive. But if they are, they’ll see you coming from a mile away. You stay here. I’ll fire once in the air if they’re gone, twice if they’re injured or dead. If you don’t hear

anything within five minutes, it means they got me. If that's the case, I want you to run away from here as fast as you can. You don't stand a chance against them. Do you hear me? If I'm captured or killed, I want you to retreat. Do not attempt to engage with these assholes."

"I hear you," I said.

And with that, she was off. She duck-walked, stayed low, moved toward the road in a line that would take her a hundred feet or so to the right of the Mustang. It was a smart thing to do. If she had gone straight at them, they might have heard her coming. I doubted they would see her, not with the stealthy costume, but they might have heard her. I tried to track her as she made her way across the field, but it was no use. She was as invisible to me now as she was to them.

Five minutes passed. Ten. Still no signal. She had told me to run away, but I couldn't just abandon her. The guys who'd chased us off the road were obviously some sort of serious threat to the security of the United States. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been following Diana, and she wouldn't have known it was *THEM*. I wasn't going to just leave her to be tortured and killed. I couldn't do that.

The whole thing was insane, when you got down to it. If it hadn't been for the blood tattoo—if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes—I still would have assumed Diana Dawkins had a screw loose. But that thing between my toes was real, so I had to assume everything else was real.

I tucked my .45 into the back of my waistband. Crouched down and scooped a handful of soil and started smearing it onto the areas where my skin was exposed. It was cold and moist and dark. It wouldn't be as effective as Diana's getup, but maybe it would help. I wished I had clothes and boots like hers, and I wished I had some of her toys. Night vision binoculars would have definitely been nice.

I headed out, following the same path she had taken. I could see her footprints in the starlight. I wasn't cold anymore. I was sweating. The scent of the eighty proof bourbon on my breath mingled with that of the soil on my skin. When I got to the ditch, I grabbed my pistol and made sure the safety was off. I crossed the culvert and struggled up the embankment, thick black mud oozing into the sides of my deck shoes.

There was a pine forest on the other side of the road. I crossed over and followed the tree line toward the Mustang, creeping quietly and trying to stay as invisible as possible.

I was about halfway there when I felt the cold steel of a gun barrel against the back of my neck.

CHAPTER SIX

The guy standing behind me told me to drop my weapon. I dropped it. It landed with a thud. He told me to get down on the ground. I complied. I figured it was in my best interest. I figured the Uzi was a bit more accurate at this range.

"Where's my friend?" I said.

"Shut up."

Footsteps. Goon Number Two walked over from the road.

"You take care of her?" Number One said.

"Yeah. She didn't want to die. Had to stab her eighteen times."

"Did you get the chip?"

"You think I'm stupid or something? Of course I got the chip."

"What should we do with him?"

"Shoot him," Number Two said. He said it in a casual tone, the way he might have said *pepperoni* if someone asked him what he wanted on his pizza.

"We need to see how much he knows," Number One said. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Hurry up."

They needed to see how much I knew. This was a good thing, because it would buy me some time. It was a bad thing, because their methods of seeing how much I knew undoubtedly involved excruciating pain. They weren't going to take me to a nice quiet room and offer me a cup of coffee and a donut. They weren't going to turn on a tape recorder and tell me a joke or two, try to make me believe they were on my side. They weren't going to interrogate me in any sort of legal or ethical way. They were going to make me hurt. Bad.

I tried to decide which was worse: dying quickly now, or dying slowly later. Either way, I was toast. I told myself that it's always best to keep breathing as long as possible. As long as I was alive, there was still hope. I told myself that, but I was having a hard time believing it.

Number One came back with the Mustang. He popped the trunk, left the engine running while he carried over a roll of duct tape. He tore off a strip and slapped it over my mouth. He wrapped my wrists and ankles while Number Two stood there holding the Uzi on me.

"You ready?" Number One said.

"I still say we shoot him."

"Come on. Help me load him in the car."

"I need to put my gun away."

"All right. Take his too."

Number Two picked my .45 up off the ground and walked over to

the Mustang. I heard the door open and then close. He came back unarmed. They lifted me and carried me over and folded me into the trunk and slammed the lid shut.

Total darkness, but it was clean in there and surprisingly roomy. It had that new trunk smell. I heard them mumbling and then laughing about something, and a couple of minutes later we were moving.

I wondered who they were. Diana had said they were the enemy. Whose enemy? The Circle's? If the organization was such a big secret, how did these guys even know about it?

We slowed and turned onto a dirt road. I knew it was dirt because it was giving the Mustang's suspension and my intracranial space a major workout. There was a little construction worker inside my head trying to jackhammer his way through my eye sockets. I could see him. He wore a yellow hardhat, and there was a fat stub of an unlit cigar sticking out of his mouth. He was covered in dust. Shortly before the smoking hot steel blade of his pneumatic tool fully penetrated my skull, before my eyeballs exploded in a shower of blood and viscous goo, the car rolled to a stop. The trunk popped open and Number One and Number Two climbed out and walked back and looked at me. Number Two was holding the Uzi.

"I'm not carrying him all the way into the house," Number Two said. "Make him walk."

Number One unwrapped my ankles and told me to get out. It was an effort without the use of my hands, but I finally managed. My knees buckled when my feet hit the ground, but I didn't fall. I staggered forward with Number One leading the way and Number Two jabbing my right kidney with the barrel of the machinegun.

It was an old house, concrete block with a low roof. Probably built sometime in the fifties. It was in the middle of nowhere. No neighbors, no streetlights, no white picket fence. It was a depressing little place, with peeling paint on the gutters and a rusty transmission in the yard. Number One opened the door and we walked inside.

A cockroach scurried across the floor when Number One switched the light on. There was a ratty old sofa and some other furniture that looked as though it might have been salvaged from a dumpster. The place smelled like dirty laundry and cigarette smoke.

They led me into the kitchen, which apparently had been updated sometime during the Nixon administration. Wood paneling, avocado-green appliances, fluorescent overhead. The long rectangular dinner table had steel legs and a Formica top that was supposed to look like wood, and on the counter there was a ceramic cookie jar. It was surrounded by crumbs, which probably didn't help with the insect problem.

Number One unwrapped my hands while Number Two held the gun

on me. They forced me to lie on the table, flat on my back, and then tied my wrists and ankles to the table legs with lengths of clothesline. Number One walked over to the electric stove and turned one of the burners to HIGH. He reached into a cabinet and pulled out a black skillet and placed it on the burner.

Number Two peeled the duct tape away from my mouth and secured it over my eyes. He grabbed the lower hem of my polo and wriggled it up to my chest, exposing the skin on my belly. By that time the air had filled with the stench of burnt grease and red-hot iron from the skillet on the stove.

"What's for dinner?" I said. "Steaks? I like mine medium rare."

Apprehension always brings out the smartass in me. It's like some sort of condition. I can't help myself. But somewhere under the surface, somewhere beyond the stoic wisecracks of a middle-aged man in deep, deep trouble, there was a quivering little boy who just wet his pants.

"Here's the deal," Number One said. "We're going to ask you a few questions. If you answer truthfully, we'll drive you back to your car and let you go. If you refuse to cooperate, we're going to start searing various parts of your body with that skillet. Your choice."

I knew they weren't going to let me go, no matter what I told them. I'd seen their faces. I could identify them in a lineup. They'd murdered Diana, and I was the only witness. They weren't going to let me live. No way.

"What was the nature of your relationship with Diana Dawkins?" Number Two said.

"Who's that?" I said.

"You need to answer our questions, or this isn't going to go well for you. Not at all. Let's try again. What was the nature of your relationship—"

"Go ahead and do what you're going to do. I'm not telling you anything."

I heard a pair of footsteps cross the kitchen, and a few seconds later I felt the bottom of the molten hot iron skillet descend on my lower abdomen. For a moment it felt as though a fiery meteorite had fallen from the sky and was burning a crater into my gut. I shouted and thrashed and writhed, and then something changed.

Suddenly, I didn't feel much of anything except the weight of the frying pan on my belly. It had scorched all the nerve endings there and had rendered them numb. That's what I thought.

One of the goons gently peeled the duct tape away from my eyes. The two of them were standing there with their arms folded across their chests, looking down at me and smiling.

Number One lifted the heavy skillet from my abdomen. It was full

of ice cubes. They'd tricked me. The other iron skillet was still on the burner. Still smoking, but cooling now. One of them had turned off the heat under it.

There was a third set of eyes, a woman's, watching me from the end of the table where my feet were tied.

I squinted her into focus.

It was Diana Dawkins.

"Now I know I can trust you," she said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I lay there in astonishment as Number One and Number Two loosened my restraints. Diana was still alive. She'd put me through the wringer, and it had all been some sort of test. An elaborate hoax to challenge my loyalty.

A wave of rage coursed through me. The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. I stood and stomped over to Diana.

"Take it easy, pal," Number One said.

"Who are these idiots?" I said to Diana.

"Friends," she said.

"Somebody could have gotten killed," I said.

"Back at your house, before you came outside, I loaded your pistol and mine with blanks. They made big booms, but they weren't going to hurt anyone."

"Those Uzis weren't loaded with blanks," I said. "I heard the incoming rounds thudding into the dirt in front of us."

"Rubber bullets," Diana said. "They sting, but they won't kill you. And the guys were instructed not to aim close, so it wasn't likely anyone was going to get hit anyway."

"Can we go now?" Number Two said.

"Yeah, take off," Diana said. "Thanks, guys."

Number One and Number Two exited through the back door. I heard them laughing as they walked around the house toward their car. The Mustang's engine rumbled to life, the throaty growl fading as they drove off into the night.

"Friends?" I said.

"It was important for me to test your loyalty."

"Yeah, well, you almost gave me a heart attack."

"Sorry. Come on, let's go."

"How are we going to get back to my car? And if we do, how—"

"It's parked outside. I paid a guy with a wench to pull it out of that field. I even stopped at a coin operated car wash on the way over here and sprayed all the mud off for you."

"So thoughtful," I said. "Now what?"

"Now back to your place. You can drop me there. I have a car parked nearby."

We didn't talk much on the drive back, other than me asking which way to go and Diana telling me. She said the squalid little concrete block bungalow was a safe house, and that we might be meeting there from time to time. I made a mental map on how to get back there if the need arose.

I steered into my driveway, killed the lights, shut the engine off.

"I don't know about all this," I said. "I think it might be out of my league."

"Remember what I told you before? Once you commit, there's no turning back."

"I just don't see how I can be of any help to you."

"Don't worry. I have a plan."

"Think you might want to share it with me?"

"Not now. I need to go."

I'd passed my little test with flying colors, and Diana still wouldn't reveal the details of her plan. She was starting to piss me off in a big way. Not that I could really do much about it. She had me by the short hairs, and she knew it.

She grabbed her backpack, climbed out of the car, and disappeared into the blackness. I checked the glove compartment. My .45 was there. It had been cleaned, and there were real bullets in the magazine now.

I rinsed my shoes off and washed my feet at the hose spigot outside. The house was dark and quiet. I didn't want to wake Juliet. I'd been gone for hours, and there was no way to explain my absence. I could have come up with something, but better if I didn't have to.

I eased my key into the front door lock and turned it slowly until the bolt slid away from the plate, every metallic click seemingly magnified a thousand times. I stepped inside and gently secured the door back and made a beeline for the bathroom.

I turned the light on and looked in the mirror. I was filthy. I'd tried to camouflage myself with the moist dirt in the field, but it hadn't been very effective. I didn't look like a Special Forces soldier. I looked like a kid who'd been making mud pies. I turned the shower on and waited for it to get warm.

I hoped the running water wouldn't wake my wife. I didn't think it would. The main bathroom is a good distance from our bedroom, and Juliet's a sound sleeper. I climbed in and watched the rich black soil leave my body and circle the drain.

This was Brittney's bathroom, the one she used when she was home, so her things were in there. Her soap and shampoo and pink razor. I scrubbed myself and rinsed and then scrubbed myself again. Got out and towed off. I smelled very pretty.

The clothes I'd been wearing were ruined. There was no way they would ever come clean. I shoved the shorts and the polo shirt and my underwear into a plastic grocery store bag, and then tossed the bag into the big trashcan in the garage.

I crept into the bedroom and slid under the covers beside Juliet. She didn't stir.

Ironically, the drama I'd just been put through—with the bogus enemy operatives and the blanks and the phony hot skillet—had convinced me that Diana was the real deal. If she would go to such great lengths to test my loyalty, then it was a safe bet that she would follow up on her threat against my family members if I ever told anyone about The Circle. I didn't like keeping secrets from my wife, but I kept telling myself it was for the best. What she didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

I closed my eyes and made a mental checklist. I wanted to be sure I'd covered all my tracks. I couldn't think of anything that might arouse suspicion, except maybe the clothes I'd thrown away. But I didn't think Juliet would miss one shirt and one pair of shorts. I had dozens.

After lying there and thinking about it for a while, I figured Juliet would wake up in the morning none the wiser, and that my late night escapade would go completely unnoticed.

That's what I figured.

CHAPTER EIGHT

My first lesson Thursday afternoon was with a kid named Terry Vine. He was a sophomore in high school, and one of my better students. He had potential, but his home life wasn't so great. He came to me a while back with tears in his eyes and told me that Darrel, his stepfather, had lost another job. That's the way he'd said it. *Another* job. Like it was a pattern.

"So I don't have enough money to continue the lessons," Terry said. "Darrel's making me hand my paycheck over to him as soon as I get it. Says food and electricity are more important than guitar lessons."

I wondered if the money went for food and electricity, or for beer and cigarettes.

"Where's your guitar?" I said.

"That's another thing. He took it to a pawnshop while I was at school one day. I came home and he was stinking drunk, passed out on the couch, and my guitar was gone. I found the pawn ticket on the coffee table under an ashtray. I'm going to get it back, though. Soon as I get my hands on a hundred and fifty bucks, I'm going to get it back."

Terry was a good kid. He reminded me of myself at that age. His family situation was even similar. His mother was still alive, but she was incarcerated, and his real father was in California. So Darrel was all he had.

Despite the lousy hand he'd been dealt, Terry was courteous and respectful and hardworking. He did okay in school, and he worked nights and weekends flipping burgers.

"You're too good to just quit," I said. "I'll loan you a guitar for now. And I won't charge you for the lessons until things get better. Okay?"

"You would do that for me?"

"Yeah. But don't tell anybody. I don't want it getting around that I'm a nice guy."

He wiped away the tears. "You're too cool, Mr. Colt."

"Don't worry about it. You can pay me back someday. And I definitely expect free tickets to your first concert."

"With backstage passes," he said.

So Thursday afternoons were my pro bono lessons. I didn't mind. Terry Vine had the potential to be as good a player as I was in my heyday. Maybe better.

I steered into the parking lot around 4:15. Someone had taken the spot by the mailbox, so I parked as close as I could to the front door. I grabbed the mail on my way in. There was an insurance bill and a card from a competing alarm company and a credit card offer. I tossed

it all on the counter and walked back to the studio room.

I hadn't heard from Diana Dawkins since she'd slinked off early Monday morning. I wondered if something had happened. Maybe she had decided I wasn't the right person for the job after all. Maybe she'd already done some work on her own and had found out what she needed to know.

Or maybe she was dead.

If she was, there was no way for me to know about it. I had no contact information. Nobody was going to notify me of anything, because nobody knew I was involved with anything. If I never heard from Diana Dawkins again, all I could do was wonder.

But I didn't think she was dead. Someone was trying to frame her. Someone was planning to assassinate the president, and they were going to make it look as though Diana had done it. They certainly didn't want her dead. Not yet, anyway. If anything, they would probably try to protect her until the dirty deed was done.

Terry Vine walked in at four-thirty, right on time. I'd left the door to the studio room open, and I was sitting on a stool trying to play some jazz chords. My hand hurt like crazy.

"How's it going?" I said.

"Hey."

Terry didn't look very happy.

"You all right?" I said.

"Yeah. I'm okay. Just tired, that's all."

He was wearing his Burger King uniform, so I knew he was going to work right after the lesson. His face was pale and his hair was greasy and he had dark circles under his eyes.

"Did you work on that stuff I showed you last week?" I said.

"Best I could. I didn't have a lot of free time."

"Well, plug in and show me what you got."

I closed the studio door. There's a red light above it that alerts me when someone comes through the front entrance. Usually nobody does, unless there's a lesson scheduled.

Terry set his guitar case on the floor and clicked open the latches. I'd loaned him a 1974 Fender Telecaster Deluxe. You always knew the Deluxe was from 1974, because that's the only year they made them. Until recently, that is. Fender started producing some kind of reissue a few years ago.

Terry pulled the guitar out of the case, strapped it on, and plugged into the amplifier next to his stool. He warmed up with some scales for a couple of minutes, and after that he tried to play a solo I'd taught him last week.

I stopped him about halfway into it.

"That's pretty good," I said. "But you have to really bend that B

string in the fourth bar, and your picking isn't steady. Go ahead and go through it again, from the top. I'll be back in a minute."

I hurried up to the front counter to get a metronome. While I was there, I saw something I hadn't noticed before, something on one of the envelopes I'd brought in from the mailbox. On the lower left hand corner of the credit card offer, there was a little red dot. It was tiny. It looked exactly like that thing between my toes. Most people wouldn't even have noticed it. Maybe it was nothing. In a way, I hoped it was nothing.

I usually just feed that kind of mail into the shredder, but the little red dot made me curious.

I tore open the envelope.

As I suspected, it was not a credit card offer.

CHAPTER NINE

Terry was waiting for me in the studio room, and I had another lesson scheduled at five, so I didn't have time to fully examine the contents of the envelope right then. But it definitely wasn't a credit card offer. It was something from Diana Dawkins. I knew that right away. There was a laminated ID card, and some photographs, and several pages of instructions. For a minute I couldn't believe she had sent such sensitive material through the mail, and then it occurred to me she probably hadn't.

She had probably delivered the envelope herself.

It was actually a fairly secure way for Diana to communicate with me, when I thought about it. Every business in the strip mall had its own mailbox, and every mailbox had a unique key, so the chances of any correspondence falling into the wrong hands were remote. It was better than talking on the phone, better than email, and certainly better than meeting in person. I thought about what she'd said—that the organization would kill her if they knew she had contacted me. Mail drops were probably the best way for her to get messages to me, and I had a feeling she would expect me to deliver my responses in a similar fashion.

I crammed everything back into the envelope, opened a drawer under the counter and dropped it in. The drawer had a lock on it, but I couldn't remember where I'd put the key. I figured it would be okay. Nobody else ever walked behind the counter. Nobody was going to mess with it.

I went ahead and slid the insurance bill and the alarm advertisement in the drawer as well. I grabbed a metronome and walked back to the studio room.

"I think I have it now," Terry said. "Check this out."

"Hold on. I want you to try it with this metronome. You need to get used to working with one. Eventually you'll be doing studio work, and sometimes you might have to play along with a click track."

"What's a click track?"

"It's a tempo guide they load onto the two-inch master tape or the digital feed or whatever they're using. It sounds like two drumsticks clicking together."

"Cool," he said.

"Most engineers will record the drums first, and the click track helps the drummer keep a perfect beat. Once they lay down the drum tracks, everyone else can use that as their tempo guide. That's the way it usually works. But some songs might not have drums in the intro, or

in other parts of the song, and some songs might not have drums at all, so the lead guitar or the piano or whatever will have to play along with the click track. Make sense?"

"Yeah. You really think I might be making records someday?"

"No doubt about it. Just keep practicing. You're already better than I was at your age."

"Really?"

"Really. All right. Here we go."

I switched on the metronome and set it to the tempo I wanted. Terry started the solo, but right away he was behind the beat. I stopped him, and he tried it again. He played the piece much better the second time, and even better than that the third. By the time our thirty minutes was up, he was well on his way to mastering it.

"Take the metronome home and practice with it," I said. "Next week, we'll pick up where we left off."

"This is hard," he said. "But fun. How much does one of these things cost?"

"Don't worry about it. You can use that one for as long as you need it."

"Thanks, Mr. Colt. You're the best teacher ever."

"Like I said, don't go telling everyone how nice I am."

He laughed. "Too late. I already have."

The red light over the studio door flashed on. Someone had come through the front entrance. My five o'clock student, no doubt.

"All right, get your stuff together," I said. "I have another young fledgling waiting in the wings."

"But I'm better than him."

"But he's paying me. So hurry up and get your stuff and leave."

Terry laughed. We had the kind of relationship where we could joke around with each other. I liked him. He was a good kid. He wiped his strings down and put the guitar back into its case, along with his cable and his strap and the metronome.

"See you next week," he said.

"All right. Tell Joey to come on back."

"I will. Thanks again, Mr. Colt."

I gave him a thumbs-up, and he turned and left the room.

There were two more lessons after Joey's, and then a thirty minute break before the last three students of the day. At six o'clock I was finally able to get back up front and take a look at the envelope from Diana.

I knelt down and reached into the drawer, pulled it out and dumped the contents. A shiny silver disk the size of a dime landed on its edge and almost rolled off the countertop. I caught it and examined it, thinking it was probably some sort of listening device. I set it aside.

There were three black and white photographs of a man, all of them taken at different angles. He looked to be in his mid-fifties. He had salt-and-pepper hair that was stylishly mussed, and a clean-shaven face that was stylishly dimpled. Expensive suit, movie star teeth. He appeared to be in excellent physical condition.

The ID card was like the one Diana had produced the day I met her, but it had a picture of me on it. At first I couldn't imagine where Diana had gotten the photograph, but then it came to me. It was my mugshot, from when I'd been arrested for possession of heroin in Tennessee. It had been doctored, so it really didn't look like a mugshot anymore, but I recognized my hair from then and the sour expression.

The top of the card said *UNITED STATES OF AMERICA DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE*, and below that was a round emblem with an eagle clutching three arrows. It had been issued to Perry Wendell Davis a little over two years ago.

Apparently that was going to be my fake name. My *organization* name. Perry Wendell Davis. I said it out loud a couple of times, just trying it on. I didn't think I looked like a Perry or a Wendell. I wondered how Diana had chosen the name. I would rather have been a Mike or a Phillip or something. Or a Sam. There was a driver's license and a birth certificate and a social security card to go along with the Department of Defense ID. Enough credentials to get a passport, if I'd wanted one.

I looked through the typed pages that had been folded around everything. On top was a short biography of the middle-aged man in the photographs. His name was Kurt Von Lepstein. He was the chief executive officer of Aero-Fleck Audio. He was fifty-six years old, and he'd been with the company for seven years. He had an impressive resume, with experience on the engineering side of the tech world as well as the business side. He was known as a fierce competitor among his peers, and a leader who wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty among his subordinates. He was one of the five people at Aero-Fleck with access to the classified documents, and Diana wanted me to start with him as we proceeded with the investigation.

It was almost six-thirty. I skimmed the rest of the enclosed pages, trying to hurry through them before my next student arrived. The pages appeared to be a tutorial, a crash course on DOD procedure and protocol, specifically targeted for someone pretending to be an inspector. Specifically targeted for me. Diana wanted me to go in and inspect the safe again, and she wanted me to plant a bug in Von Lepstein's office. Apparently she thought I could pull it off, but I wasn't so sure.

Inspector Davis, I was to be called. It had a nice ring to it. Maybe only a handful of people would know that my first name was Perry,

and that my middle name was Wendell. Perry Wendell. I said it out loud again, trying to get used to the sound of it.

The final page was a personal message from Diana. She didn't sign it or anything, but I knew it was her.

Dear Inspector Davis,

I hope you have found everything in order. If you have any questions or concerns, please provide them in writing and deliver them to the following address.

I recognized the name of the place. It was a law office in another strip mall not far from my studio.

There's a drop box on the lower right side of the front door. Slide any future correspondence into the box, and make sure it's in a sealed envelope marked KEYS TO THE CONDO. Once you have read these instructions and have committed them to memory, please burn them along with the envelope itself. It's important that you burn everything and not shred it. Shredding is not as secure as most people think it is.

I'll be in touch.

My six-thirty student walked in, a twelve-year-old named Riley Shaw. He was a few minutes early. His dad was with him.

I quickly gathered all the papers and photos and shoved everything back into the drawer. Father and son looked at me with peculiar expressions, as though they knew I was trying to be discreet about something.

"Go on back to the studio, Riley," I said. "I'll be there in a minute."

Riley didn't say anything. He was a quiet kid. He carried his guitar to the studio room and started setting up for his lesson.

His father handed me a check for fifty dollars.

"I'm going to walk over and do a little grocery shopping," he said. "I'll be back at seven."

"Great," I said. "See you then."

I was glad he wasn't going to hang around. I didn't want to have to worry about him snooping behind the counter.

At eight-fifteen, after my last student had left and I'd locked everything up, I drove out to my Airstream camper on Lake Barkley. I used to live there, before Juliet and I got married. It had been a little cramped sometimes, but it was mine. I ran my PI business from there, and I went fishing almost every day. I kept it now as a weekend getaway for my family, and as a place for me to go sometimes when I just want to be by myself and think.

My friend Joe Crawford used to own the lots where the campers are

parked. He owned the bait and tackle store, and the dock, and the fleet of jonboats for rent. Joe owned all that, and he dealt in international real estate. He was a wealthy man, and a good man, but his life came to a horrible end a while back when he was abducted by a psychopath named Malden Zephauser. He was tortured and killed, and it was partially my fault, and it was a heavy sack of guilt I would be carrying for the rest of my life. Joe had been my best friend since sixth grade. I think about him every day. I miss him dearly.

His son Dylan runs the place now. Dylan's only nineteen, but he has a good head on his shoulders. He's a good kid. He takes after his dad.

I steered into the gravel driveway and pulled up the hill to lot twenty-seven.

My lot.

I killed the engine and got out. I opened the hatch and climbed inside the camper and switched the light on. It was stuffy in there, so I opened a couple of windows. Soon the nice cool April night air filtered in, carrying the scents of the lake and the surrounding woods with it. I poured myself two fingers of bourbon and drank it all in a single gulp. It took the edge off a long and stressful day.

But I hadn't gone out there to drink. I wanted to study Diana's instructions more thoroughly than I'd been able to at the studio, and I wanted to do it at a place where I wasn't likely to be seen or interrupted. I sat at the table and spread the papers out in front of me. It was a lot to learn. Six pages of densely-packed text, front and back. I read through everything three times before I started feeling as though I might be getting a handle on it. Then I read through everything again.

I can do this, I told myself. If I put my mind to it, I can do it.

I studied the instructions some more, standing and pacing and reading the entire document out loud. I poured another shot of whiskey and did it again. By the time I finished, I could practically recite everything from memory.

I walked outside and carried the papers to the rusty fifty-five gallon drum behind the camper. I twisted the pages together and then lit them with a butane cigarette lighter. The bright orange flames consumed the document, ashes dancing away in the breeze, the embers dying before they hit the ground. I dropped the last bit of it into the drum before the fire got too close to my fingers. It flared and then burned down to ashes.

I went back inside and slid the phony driver's license and the Department of Defense identification card and the shiny silver disk into my wallet, and then I put the social security card and the birth certificate in the built-in gun locker in the bedroom. Juliet doesn't like guns in the house, so when we got married I installed the locker and

started keeping most of my collection in the Airstream. The .45 I bought down in Key West stays in the Jimmy's glove compartment, and there's a .357 magnum strapped to the underside of our bed frame, but I keep most of my guns in the camper.

The only key to the gun locker was in my pocket, so I wasn't worried about Juliet or Brittney finding my fake credentials. In fact, it probably would have been fine to just leave everything out. Neither of them came to the lake much anymore, so it was hardly an issue.

My cell phone vibrated. I pulled it out and looked at the caller ID. It was Juliet. I hesitated, thought about letting it go to voicemail, finally picked up.

"Hi sweetheart," I said.

"Where are you?"

"Working late."

"You're still at the studio?"

"I'll be home in a little while. Want me to bring something to—"

"I know you're not at the studio," she said. "Because I drove over there looking for you. Where did you go?"

"Nowhere special. Like I said, I'll be home in a little while. I'll bring something to eat if you want me to."

Her voice broke. "I bought Chinese while I was out. At the place by your studio. I already ate, but there's plenty leftover if you're hungry."

"Are you upset about something?" I said.

"I'm okay. I'll see you later, Nicholas."

"I love you," I said, but she had already hung up.

CHAPTER TEN

I made it to Aero-Fleck Audio at one-thirty Friday afternoon. I'd stopped and rented a car on the way, per Diana's instructions. It was a Nissan Altima. Black, brand new. It looked like the kind of car an inspector for the Department of Defense might drive. Nice, but not pretentious. I wore a light gray suit with a white shirt and a yellow tie.

There had been a black leather briefcase on the Jimmy's seat when I started out. I assumed Diana had put it there sometime during the night. It contained a flimsy plastic three-ring binder and a cell phone and a credit card. Nothing else. Secured inside the binder were two pages of document numbers, with AERO-FLECK AUDIO printed in raised gold lettering at the top of each page. I figured the gold was there for a reason. It was more than flash. It made the stationery identifiable. It wasn't something you could run off at the local copy store.

Aero-Fleck was located in an industrial complex in Orange Park, not far from the dog track. A two-story yellow brick office building stood facing the road, and behind that there was a large metal structure I supposed housed the actual factory.

I picked up the phone Diana had left for me, called the main number from my car.

"Aero-Fleck. This is Rita. How may I provide you with outstanding service this afternoon?"

I've always wondered if receptionists go to some kind of special school where they learn to be perpetually polite and cheerful. Sitting at a desk and answering the phone all day would get on my nerves after a while. By the end of the shift, I would be picking up the receiver and shouting *what do you want?* I wouldn't last a day. Rita was good at it. She had a sweet and resonate voice. She used just the right inflections, and she had just the right hint of a southern accent. There was something almost motherly about her voice. She sounded like someone who might walk in with a tray of cookies at any minute.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Inspector Davis, from the Department of Defense. I'm here to take a look at the security of your classified documents."

"No problem, sir. You'll need to talk to Bob Waters. Allow me to transfer you now. I'll put you on hold for just a second."

"Can I speak to Mr. Von Lepstein instead?"

That caught her off guard. She was quiet for a couple of beats.

"Well, sir, Bob Waters is the Contractor Program Security Officer,

and—”

“I know who he is, but this is a special case. I’m going to need to talk to the CEO eventually, so I might as well start with him. It’ll save everybody a lot of time.”

“What did you say your name was again?”

The pleasant and helpful voice was gone. She sounded irritated now. I’d disrupted her routine. I’d dumped a cupful of sand in her crankcase.

“Perry Davis,” I said. “DOD.”

“Hold, please.”

I listened to a commercial telling me all about the company and its speaker systems. About how they were second to none when it came to in-flight sound quality and durability; about how every employee, from the CEO to the cleaning crew, was treated with respect and dignity; about how Aero-Fleck led the industry in environmental friendliness, utilizing solar power and recycled materials to help decrease its carbon footprint. It sounded like a great place to work. I wondered if they had any openings for world class guitarists with crippled hands or ace detectives with revoked licenses. For some reason, I doubted it.

The commercial went dead mid-sentence, and a couple of seconds later Von Lepstein clicked on.

“This is Kurt,” he said.

Apparently he thought we were going to be on a first-name basis, but I wasn’t going for it. I didn’t want to be his buddy. I didn’t want to have a beer with him later and talk about fishing or football. In the instructions I’d read last night, Diana had stressed the importance of maintaining a strictly professional relationship with the contractors. The United States government basically employs them, she’d said. The government is their bread and butter. Without government dollars, they don’t exist. Stay in character, she’d said. Don’t get friendly with the help.

I wasn’t there to be pals with anyone. I was there to check their security. I was there to rake them over the coals, if necessary. I had the power to snap my fingers and shut the place down. Or so they thought. That was the kind of power a real DOD inspector had, and that was the kind of attitude I needed to maintain.

I wasn’t going to call the chief executive officer of the company *Kurt*, and he wasn’t going to call me Perry.

“Hello, Mr. Von Lepstein,” I said. “This is Inspector Davis from the Department of Defense. In five minutes, I’ll be coming to inspect the security of your classified documents. I’ll need to see everything, from the engineering schematics to the training manuals.”

“We just had an inspection last month,” he said. “You guys usually

only come twice a year. Was there some kind of problem?"

"This is an unsecure line, and at this time I'm not at liberty to discuss whether there was a problem or not. If there was, or if there is today, you will get a notice from the Pentagon on how to remedy the situation. Of course, if there's an actual breach of security, the factory will be closed and a major investigation will ensue. Let's hope that doesn't happen. Nobody wants that. There was indeed an inspection last month. But, as I'm sure you know, the Department of Defense has the right to perform impromptu inspections with unlimited frequency. We can occupy the premises every day if we want to. It's all in the contract, Mr. Von Lepstein."

"I'm quite aware of what's in the contract. What was your name again?"

"Perry Davis," I said.

"Listen, Perry—"

"Inspector Davis. Please."

He sighed. "Okay. Inspector Davis, then. Are you new around here? We usually see Hal Greenwood or Diana Dawkins."

"Today you're going to see me. Again, I'll be there in five minutes. Can you meet me at the front door?"

"I'll send Bob. He'll escort you to the document room."

"I don't want Bob. I want you."

"Why is it so imperative that—"

"I'll explain when I get there. Five minutes. All right, Mr. Von Lepstein?"

He hung up. I took that as a yes.

I let four minutes tick off the clock, and then I grabbed my briefcase and climbed out of the Altima and headed toward the front entrance. A sign mounted on the plate glass said ATTENTION ALL VISITORS: NO CELLULAR TELEPHONES OR DIGITAL CAMERAS BEYOND THIS POINT. Diana had already informed me of the policy, and I had stowed my cell phone in the glove compartment before getting out of the car.

Kurt Von Lepstein was standing behind the door with his arms folded across his chest. He smiled, but his eyes said *why are you wasting my time?*

My heart was pounding, and I felt a bead of sweat trickle down my back. I was nervous, but I maintained eye contact and kept a slight snarl on my lips. I was trying my best to look like a badass DOD guy. Like a cool cucumber with all his ducks in a row. I pulled the door open and stepped inside.

Von Lepstein extended his hand.

"Inspector Davis?" he said.

"That's right. Nice place you have here."

"Thanks. My office is on the second floor. We can talk there."

"Perfect."

That's where I wanted to be, Von Lepstein's office. If he hadn't offered to take me there, I would have insisted on it.

The reception desk was a semi-round art deco thing with shiny black and gray lines and a brushed stainless steel base that looked like a giant loudspeaker cut in half. It faced the front door, and behind it sat the owner of the silky voice I'd spoken to earlier. Rita. At least I assumed it was her. She wore a tight knit dress and diamond earrings and too much makeup for someone who wasn't going to be anchoring the local TV news. She looked at me and smiled as Von Lepstein and I walked by.

We got on the elevator, and he pushed the button for the second floor.

"So there was a problem with the last inspection?" he said.

"Did I say that?"

"No, but your presence here pretty much indicates it. And you wouldn't have insisted on seeing *me* first thing unless there was something out of the ordinary."

I didn't say anything until we were off the elevator and safely inside his office. He sat behind his desk, and I sat in the leather armchair across from him. He planted his elbows on the glossy cherry desktop and rested his chin on his hands, which were laced together and freshly manicured.

My briefcase was on my lap, and my right hand rested on its flat surface. My left hand was in my pocket, the shiny little silver disk from Diana's package between my thumb and forefinger. I discreetly peeled off the tiny tab on the glue strip as I told Mr. Von Lepstein another lie.

"You're right," I said. "There was a problem. Diana Dawkins' report was incomplete. Either she made a mistake and failed to note a very important document, or there's an entire set of schematics missing from your safe. If the Department of Defense was in error, of course there will be no repercussions. If the schematics really are missing, then we have a problem indeed."

"There's nothing missing from my safe today, and there was nothing missing the day Diana was here. I can promise you that."

"We'll see. Of course, I'll have to repeat the entire inspection, so I'll be here for the rest of the afternoon."

"Not a problem. I'll walk you to the safe room. I already called for a guard, so he should be there waiting for us."

"Great," I said.

We got up, and when he turned his back to me to open the door, I stuck the disk under the front of his desk. It was an audio bug, as I'd

suspected. It was actually the main reason I'd come to Aero-Fleck. The inspector disguise was mostly just a way to get me inside the big guy's office so I could plant the device. In addition to that, Diana wanted to know if the document outlining the assassination was still in the safe. If so, she wanted me to smuggle out a copy. But my primary purpose was to plant the bug.

I followed Von Lepstein out of the office. The safe room was all the way at the end of the hall, on the right. A uniformed guard was sitting in a chair by the door. There was a small folding table beside him with a zippered plastic bag on top of it. The guard instructed me to empty my pockets, and then he stuffed my keys and my wallet and my sunglasses and my pack of Clark's Teaberry gum into the bag and sealed it. Before today, I'd never bought a pack of Teaberry gum in my life, but apparently Perry Wendell Davis loved the stuff. It was part of my cover, or *legend*, as Diana put it.

"Your briefcase," the guard said.

I set the case on the table and opened it. The guard removed the two pages from the binder and ran a finger along the gold lettering, making sure the script was raised like it was supposed to be. He frisked me, and then he handed me the loose pages, along with a small slip of paper with the combination to the safe written on it. Those were the only items I was allowed to take into the room, and the only items I could bring out.

The security measures came as no surprise. I'd known what to expect. Diana had told me exactly how everything would go.

Still, it was a little unnerving.

I was about to enter a room I had no business entering.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I walked into the safe room. The guard pulled the door shut and told me to knock twice when I was ready to come out. I was locked in. There was no doorknob on the inside of the door. I looked around for security cameras. There were none in plain sight, and there weren't any houseplants or mirrors or framed pictures where a camera could have been easily hidden. Diana had told me there wouldn't be any. Something about them posing more of a security risk than their usefulness warranted. But I looked around anyway, for my own peace of mind.

There was a wooden chair and a wooden table and a gray vault about the size of a dormitory refrigerator. An old steel desk lamp, big and beige and ugly, provided the only source of light.

I pulled the chair up next to the safe and took a seat. In the movies there would have been a retinal scanner and a fingerprint scanner and an electronic keypad with a digital display. There was none of that. No bells, no whistles. Access to the safe was guarded by a good old fashioned combination lock and nothing else. Primitive, but effective. Good enough for government work, as they say. Supposedly, the combination was changed on a monthly basis, and after every DOD inspection. So even if it had been changed yesterday, it would be changed again today when I departed. Only fivewhile I was stuffingpeople knew the combination on a day-to-day basis, so one of those people must have planted the assassination outline. Or maybe a couple of them were working together. That was a possibility. At any rate, there were a limited number of suspects.

I dialed in the numbers from the chit the guard had given me, pushed the shiny steel lever down, and pulled the door open. The documents were on three different shelves. They were big bulky things, printed on legal size paper, bound with heavy brown card stock and steel fasteners. I pulled the one Diana was interested in. The words CLASSIFIED and TOP SECRET had been stamped on the front cover in bold red letters.

I opened it. Now I was all in. Now I had committed a crime, a big one. Now there was definitely no turning back.

I started at the beginning, my fingers trembling as I carefully turned each page.

It quickly became apparent that this was not a book that had been handled carefully. It was a working copy, more like something you would find at a construction site than in a library. The pages were heavily creased where they had been taken out and folded and slipped

into a pocket at one time or another, by the Contractor Program Security Officer, one of the two engineers with access, the project manager, or Kurt Von Lepstein. That's the way it worked, Diana had explained. They removed a few pages at a time, as needed, rather than tote the unwieldy binders around while they tried to work.

I didn't understand the detailed diagrams. Not even a little bit. They looked like roadmaps, but the roads didn't have any names and there was no point of reference. It was like some kind of crazy labyrinth you could never find your way out of. Most of the pages had text printed along the margins, in English, but even that didn't make much sense to me. It was a bunch of scientific jargon I wasn't familiar with.

It was all starting to give me a headache, and if the outline for the assassination wasn't in this book—where it had been during Diana's inspection—then I still had fifteen more volumes to examine.

My eyes started to cross, and I thought I was going to have to close them for a while. But then there it was, about three quarters of the way in. Diana had found it further toward the front, so someone had moved it since she'd done her inspection. Someone—one of the five people with access to the safe—had repositioned the page within the same binder. I wondered why, and then it occurred to me that maybe some of the other schematics had encrypted text embedded into them as well. Diana hadn't said so, but maybe they did. Maybe the person who moved the outline was communicating with its intended recipient by shuffling the pages around.

Diana had gone through extensive training in cryptology, but I had not. The outline was nothing more than gobbledygook to me. Diana had told me what to look for, and that was the only reason I'd even recognized it. To a casual observer, or an ordinary Department of Defense inspector, the outline looked like any other page in the volume.

But the text on this particular page worked on two levels. For the engineers, it provided the information necessary to understand the schematic—more scientific jargon. For Diana, who had seen through all that, down to the code, and of course for the person who created the page, it provided a detailed plan for assassinating the president.

And a detailed plan to frame Diana for the crime.

She had sent me to Aero-Fleck for the inspection because of DOD protocol. Otherwise, she would have come back to the plant herself. When a re-inspect is ordered, for whatever reason, it has to be performed by someone other than the person who did the original. Aero-Fleck was well versed in the protocol, as were all government contractors, so a big red flag would have been raised if Diana had shown up to investigate the problem herself. It would have aroused too much suspicion, and it would have made it practically impossible

to achieve our secondary goal, which was to make a copy of the outline.

Diana wanted a copy, and there was only one way that was going to happen.

I had to get the document out of the room.

I carefully disassembled the binder. I lifted the page out and folded it, making sure I followed the creases that were already there, and then I rolled it into a tight cylinder. I undid my pants, reached back and pulled the latex condom from between my butt cheeks. I inserted the rolled-up page into the condom, and then inserted the condom into my rectum. It was uncomfortable, but not unbearable. I pulled my pants up and got everything fastened back and reassembled the binder. I walked around the table a few times, practicing, making sure I could manage my normal gait without looking like I had a broomstick up my ass.

I locked the binder back in the vault, looked around and made sure everything was exactly as it had been when I walked into the room.

I knocked twice on the door. The guard opened it.

“You done already?” he said.

“No. I need to go to the head.”

I set the two sheets of paper with the raised gold lettering on the table by the guard’s chair, along with the combination chit. He frisked me again.

“Turn that corner, and then the restrooms are there on the left.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I turned the corner, trying not to allow my discomfort to give me away. It felt as though a proctologist was following me around. I wondered what I had gotten myself into. If they caught me, I would never see the light of day again. I would be arrested and charged with espionage. My life would be over.

But I wasn’t going to get caught. I was determined not to. The money Diana had promised was going to allow me to get my business where it needed to be. Juliet could cut back her hours at the hospital, focus more on getting her master’s. Brittney could get rid of that old Camry and have something decent to drive. Maybe I could even get a new car myself. The money was going to change our lives. And even though I was technically committing a very serious crime, the end result was going to be a good thing. I was going to help save the president, help thwart one of the most elaborate conspiracies in the history of the world. In the end, I was going to be fat with cash and I was going to be feeling pretty good about myself. I was determined not to get caught.

I walked into the men’s room, ducked into the stall and secured the door. Diana had said the restrooms on this side of the second floor

never got much traffic. It hadn't been the ideal place for her to leave a plant, but she said it was the best she could do under the circumstances. Most of her potential recruits were male, so that's why she had chosen the men's room over the women's.

If an inspector from the Department of Defense came into a business like Aero-Fleck and established that there was a page missing from a document, a lot of things would happen. The factory would go into lockdown mode immediately, and nobody would be allowed to come or go until every employee was thoroughly searched—including a cavity search.

So of course I wasn't going to tell anyone there was a page missing.

I was hoping to get out of the building without even seeing Von Lepstein again. But, if I did have to talk to him, I would tell him that the inspection went perfectly. I would say that there were no problems. I would say that Diana Dawkins had simply forgotten to check off the document in question when she handed in her report.

That would get me away from the place, but I still couldn't take the document with me. If I took it with me, the person or people who created it—one or more of the five Aero-Fleck employees with access to the safe—would know next time they came looking for it. Once they discovered the security breach, they would simply change their plan and Diana and I would be back to square one. So I couldn't leave the premises with the document. I had to make a copy.

I stood on the toilet and lifted the drop ceiling tile directly above me. I eased it out of its frame and set it to the side. There was a cast iron pipe running parallel to the wall. I reached behind the pipe and found the digital camera Diana had planted there the day she'd found the assassination plan. It looked like a gold lipstick tube. When you turned the screw-on cap clockwise past the stopping point, it opened a tiny port on the bottom for a split second—just long enough to capture the image. It was a cool little gadget, like something you might see on a James Bond movie. I liked it.

I pulled my pants down and extracted the document. I'd taken the same kind of bowel prep people take before the night of a colonoscopy, so the condom was clean. I sat on the toilet, pulled the page out, unfolded it and placed it flat on the floor in front of me. I snapped ten pictures, adjusting the position of the camera each time to make sure I recorded the whole thing. I refolded the paper and rolled it into a cylinder again, and while I was stuffing it back into the condom, the door creaked open and someone walked into the restroom.

I looked upward. The ceiling tile above me was still ajar. I'd left it that way so I could put the camera back by the pipe when I was finished with it. I planned to retrieve it after the inspection, after the

guard frisked me for the final time.

But now some guy was in the restroom with me. If he noticed the missing tile, it could mean big trouble for me. I was in danger of literally being caught with my pants down. It had been a mistake to leave the tile off while I took the pictures, a crucial error in judgment that might end up costing me dearly.

The guy stepped up to the urinal.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I didn't breathe.

I heard the unmistakable sound of him unzipping his trousers, followed by the hiss of urine against porcelain.

Maybe the guy hadn't even noticed me. That's what I was hoping. Most members of the male species just waltz in and do their business and wash their hands and leave. Not like women, who somehow manage to take five or ten minutes every trip. What they do in there all that time in anybody's guess. It's one of those unsolved mysteries of the universe.

So I was hoping he hadn't noticed me, but my hopes were dashed when he said, "How 'bout those Gators?"

My secret agent operation aside, I hate it when people walk in and start talking to you while you're on the crapper. It just never seems right to be having a conversation during such a private activity. Normally, I would have just ignored the bonehead, but I didn't want to antagonize him.

My hands were sweating.

"They did good," I said.

I figured he was talking about the University of Florida basketball team, about their performance at the NCAA tournament last month. I don't keep up with college sports, but I'd heard enough to know they made it to the final four.

"Next year they'll go all the way," he said.

"Yeah, maybe."

He zipped up. "Look at that," he said. "Those idiots in maintenance left the ceiling tile open."

"No wonder it's so hot in here," I said. "All the cold air is going into that hole. I'll fix it before I leave."

He turned the water on to wash his hands.

"They need to be more careful," he said. "I'm going to call the maintenance supervisor and give him a ration of shit, and then—"

"Really. I'll fix it. It's no big deal."

He was drying his hands with a paper towel when his cell phone trilled. He answered the call. He was silent for a few beats, and then said, "You're kidding. All right, I'm on it."

He walked out of the restroom in a hurry, didn't say anything else to me.

I stuffed the condom back into its uncomfortable hiding place, and then I stood on the toilet again and stashed the camera back behind the pipe and lowered the ceiling tile into place. Good to go. Except for

the guy who had come in and relieved himself. Now I had him to worry about.

It seemed as though the call he'd gotten might have been urgent, though. From the sound of his voice, and from the way he'd departed so expediently. Maybe he wouldn't give the ceiling tile a second thought. That's what I was counting on. My life depended on it.

I washed my hands and left the men's room and walked back to the guard's little station outside the safe room.

"You all right?" he said.

"Upset stomach."

"Want a Roll-Aid?"

"Sure."

He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out half a roll and handed it to me.

"Keep them. I got more in the office."

"Thanks," I said.

I peeled off a couple and popped them into my mouth and chewed them. The guard patted me down again and gave me my papers and let me back into the safe room.

I did everything in reverse, and five minutes later the document was back into its binder where it belonged and the empty condom was back between my butt cheeks. Success. Mission accomplished. I was starting to get used to this spy gig. I was starting to enjoy it.

I spent the next two hours pretending to go through the rest of the books. If someone had walked in, they would have seen an inspector from the Department of Defense sitting there doing his job. But nobody walked in. I worked undisturbed until I turned the final page and locked the final binder back into the vault.

I knocked twice, and the guard let me out. I assumed the position, and he patted me down for the last time. At least I hoped it would be the last time. If he wanted to do it again, he was going to have to buy me a drink first. Maybe light some candles.

"You're good to go," he said.

"Cool."

He handed me the plastic bag with my things in it, and watched carefully as I put my document list back into the flimsy three-ring and closed it all up in the briefcase.

"Mr. Von Lepstein's in a meeting," he said. "Did you need to talk to him before you leave?"

"No. I'll send him my report via email. Everything checked out okay."

"Great. You have a nice day now."

"Thanks. And thanks again for the Roll-Aids."

"They help?"

“Actually, I think I’m going to have to go again on my way out. Bean burritos last night.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” he said.

I took a detour to the restroom on my way to the elevator. Locked myself in the stall again, stood on the toilet and lifted the ceiling tile and retrieved the camera.

That’s when the maintenance man walked in.

He was carrying a ladder.

“What are you doing?” he said.

I palmed the little gold lipstick tube.

“Putting this tile back where it belongs,” I said.

“I got a call about that from Paul Jones. Who are you?”

“Perry Davis. I’m an inspector for the Department of Defense.”

I eased the tile into place, climbed down from the toilet, pocketed the camera. I opened the door to the stall and walked over to the sink to wash my hands.

“One of the night guys must have been messing around up there,” the maintenance man said. “I’ll have to have a talk with them.”

“Might be a good idea.”

“You shouldn’t have climbed up there like that. You could have fallen, hurt yourself real bad.”

“Just trying to be helpful,” I said.

“Appreciate it. Since I’m here anyway, I guess I’ll take a look. Try to see what the heck they were doing. I couldn’t find a work order on it anywhere.”

“All right,” I said. “Well, have a good one.”

“You too, Mr. Davis.”

I opened the door and walked away. Took the elevator to the first floor, made a beeline for the exit. I needed to get out of there before the maintenance man figured out there had never been anything to work on behind that tile.

Rita the receptionist spoke to me as I walked past her fancy desk.

“How did it go?” she said.

I turned and faced her. My back was against the door. One more step and I would have been outside.

“Great,” I said. “No problems.”

“Glad to hear it.” She fanned herself with her hand. “Is it hot in here, or is it just me?”

I shrugged. “Feels okay, I guess.”

She was trying to bait me into some clever banter, but I just wanted to make it out the door and never look back.

“Anyway,” she said. “It’s been a long day. I’m so ready for a nice drink somewhere. Maybe some dinner. One more hour, and I’m out of here.”

She smiled at me in a flirty way.

I looked at my watch. "Yeah. Well, I better get going. I still have a lot of paperwork to—"

Her phone buzzed. She held a finger up, indicating she wanted me to stick around while she took the call.

I didn't.

I backed out of the door and walked toward my car at a pace that would have made a New Yorker proud. I was almost trotting when I heard Rita's voice from behind.

"Inspector Davis," she shouted. "Mr. Von Lepstein wants to talk to you before you leave."

I pretended not to hear her. I climbed into the Altima and fired it up and burned some rubber on the way out of the parking lot.

I tooled through the industrial park, made it out to the highway and took a left. I needed to take the Altima back to the rental car place. If someone came looking for Perry Wendell Davis, the trail would stop there. I'd used the credit card Diana had left for me, so my real name wasn't on anything.

I took a right at the first major intersection, breathed a sigh of relief. In ten minutes I would be Nicholas Colt again. In ten minutes I would be driving my Jimmy back to the studio.

I was feeling pretty good about everything until I looked in the rearview mirror and noticed the flashing lights behind me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was Von Lepstein. I could see his face. That's how close he was.

Riding my ass and flashing his headlights and honking his horn.

He obviously wanted me to pull over. Could the maintenance man have figured anything out that quickly? I didn't think so. Then what did Von Lepstein want with me? What could possibly have been urgent enough for Aero-Fleck's chief executive officer to leave his post and frantically pursue a DOD inspector?

I had no intention of stopping to find out. Whatever it was, it wasn't good. I needed to lose him and get rid of the Altima and get out of Orange Park.

I downshifted and sped up and started weaving through traffic. I could still see his headlights, but they were farther away from me now. They were several car lengths behind and two lanes over. If I could make it to the interstate, I stood a good chance of shaking him. That is, if a cop didn't nail me somewhere along the way for speeding and running red lights.

My cell phone rang. The one Diana Dawkins had left for me.

"Hello?"

"It's me," Diana said. "You're going to have to pull over and talk to him."

"Where are you?"

"Don't worry about it. Ahead on the right there's a Chinese buffet that went out of business a few months ago. Turn in there and pull around back. And don't hang up. I want to hear what Von Lepstein is saying."

"I think I can lose him," I said.

"Don't even try it. Pull over like I told you to."

I steered into the parking lot, whipped around to the service entrance, and killed the engine.

"You still there?" I said.

"Yes. Set the phone somewhere where I'll be able to hear your conversation with Von Lepstein."

I set the phone on the passenger's seat and rolled down the windows and waited.

The restaurant completely blocked my view of the road. There was a big green dumpster and a stack of empty pallets and a rusty grocery cart. The cart had some old clothes in it and a pair of combat boots and a Jacksonville Jaguars ball cap. It was a homeless person's cart. I wondered what the story was behind that. I wanted to think the cart's owner had moved on to something better, but I doubted that was the

case.

Von Lepstein pulled in beside me.

I opened my door and climbed out.

He opened his door and climbed out.

"I wanted to talk to you before you left," he said. "About the inspection."

"Are you out of your mind? Is this how you always do business? I really don't appreciate you chasing me down like this, Mr. Von Lepstein. The inspection went fine. I'll email you my report. Now, if you'll excuse me."

I started to get back into the Altima.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Pardon me?" I tried to convey an expression of disbelief, as though he'd asked me a question that was beyond ridiculous. Like how to get to the moon from here or something.

"What's your real name? Why were you checking out our schematics? You some kind of corporate spy or something?"

"That's a pretty serious accusation," I said. "And it's also pretty ludicrous. I already told you my name. You never asked for identification, but you should have. It's protocol, and that's the one area of the inspection I plan to fail you on."

"Can you show me your identification now?"

"I can, but it's not going to make any difference in your grade on the inspection."

"Please."

I pulled out my wallet and showed him my driver's license and my Department of Defense ID card.

"Satisfied?" I said. "Because I would really like to—"

"These are fake," he said. "Want to know how I know they're fake?"

I laughed. "Sure. This should be good."

Before he could answer, I heard a whirring sound followed by a sickening thud.

Von Lepstein's mouth opened and his eyes bulged. He fell to his knees and then toppled forward. There was a wooden shank sticking out of his back, what appeared to be a splintered-off piece of a broomstick.

I looked around, didn't see anybody. Von Lepstein's back had been to the dumpster, so the makeshift dagger had to have come from that direction.

I reached into the passenger's side door of the Altima and grabbed the cell phone.

"You there?" I said.

"Yes."

"Von Lepstein's dead. Someone threw a—"

“Take his wallet and get out of there,” she said.

“What?”

“Just do it. Now.”

She disconnected.

I reached into Von Lepstein’s sports coat and pulled out his wallet, and then I climbed into my car and sped away.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I drove to the rental place and turned in the car. I'd parked my Jimmy on the other side of the mall, so there was no chance of anyone connecting me to the Altima. All trails led to Perry Wendell Davis, a man who technically didn't exist.

But Nicholas Colt *did* exist, and he had just witnessed a murder. He'd seen Kurt Von Lepstein—the chief executive officer of Aero-Fleck Audio—die from a stab wound, and then he had taken the dead man's wallet.

Nicholas Colt was rattled. Confused. He needed to talk to Diana Dawkins. He needed a drink.

But he still had some work to do.

I went to my studio, stood behind the counter and sealed the lipstick camera into a small padded envelope. I had no idea what to do with Von Lepstein's wallet. I thought about locking it in the briefcase along with the flimsy binder and the cell phone and the credit card and the phony DOD credentials, but I didn't. I decided to stick it in my pocket and take it to the Airstream later. It would be safer in the gun locker with the phony birth certificate and social security card. I set the briefcase on the floor behind the counter and tried to forget about it for the moment.

There was a picture calendar tacked to the wall beside me, each month decorated with a photograph of a vintage guitar. I glanced at it, and for the first time all day realized it was Friday the 20th. One week until the president would make his speech at the University of Florida commencement ceremony.

It had been a pretty lucky day so far. For me, that is. Not for Kurt Von Lepstein. I'd planted the audio bug and I'd taken pictures of the coded classified document and I'd made it out of the plant with the camera. All without being arrested and charged with espionage against the United States of America. As days go, it had been extremely lucky, right up to the time Von Lepstein started following me. I still couldn't figure out how he'd caught on, how he'd come to the conclusion I was a fraud. Maybe Diana could fill me in later.

I grabbed a Sharpie and wrote *KEYS TO THE CONDO* across the front of the envelope in block letters. My instructions were to wait until dark, and then deliver it to the drop box at the attorney's office.

Fridays and Sundays were my free days. No guitar students. Fridays to catch up on business matters, and Sundays to catch up on rest.

So it caught me by surprise when Terry Vine walked in at six o'clock carrying the instrument I'd loaned him.

"Hi Terry," I said.

"Hey."

He leaned the guitar case against the counter and sat on the wooden stool there across from me.

"What's up?" I said.

"I'm here for my lesson."

"Your lesson was yesterday. Your lesson is always on Thursday at four-thirty. This is Friday, and it's six o'clock. I don't do lessons on Friday."

"It's Thursday," Terry said. "And my lesson is at six. It's always been at six."

I looked at the calendar again. When you're fifty, and you tend to overindulge in alcohol from time to time, and you work hard trying to build your business and you have a kid in college and you have recurring nightmares, you lose a day every now and then. Sometimes, you even wonder if you're losing your mind.

Pixilated, my grandmother used to say. It meant you were going bananas.

But I knew I had seen Terry yesterday, and I knew his lessons were always at four-thirty.

Maybe he was losing *his* mind.

I put my finger on the calendar, on the box with 20 printed on it.

"This is today, Terry. And—"

He started laughing. "I'm just messing with you, Mr. Colt. Don't get all uptight now."

"Messing with me?" I said.

"Next week is spring break. I'm going out of town, so you said I could do two lessons in a row this week. Thursday and Friday. You told me to come at six. Don't you remember?"

I didn't remember, but Terry was a good kid and I knew he wouldn't lie to me.

"Must have slipped my mind," I said. "Go on back to the studio room. I'll be there in a minute."

Terry walked back and started setting up. He was lucky that I just happened to be at the studio. Normally, I would have been home by six o'clock on a Friday.

I dropped the padded envelope into the drawer under the counter, joined Terry in the studio room. After the lesson, I asked him where he was going for spring break.

"I'm flying out to California to see my dad," he said. "He sent me money for a ticket."

"That's great. What part of California?"

"The Mojave desert. My dad's in the Air Force, stationed at Edward's there. And he's going to take me to some other cool places."

Los Angeles, Disneyland. And there's a big motocross race at the Rose Bowl. Can't wait to see that."

Terry put the Telecaster in its case, snapped it shut.

"Sounds like a fun time," I said. "How long has it been since you've seen your dad?"

He didn't answer my question. In fact, he didn't say another word. He picked up the guitar case and walked out of the studio room.

Kids. I must have pushed the wrong button. I sat there for a couple of minutes wondering what I'd done to make him angry.

I turned the amplifiers off and locked the studio room, walked to the front counter and called Juliet to ask her if she wanted me to bring home something for dinner.

"Are you coming now?" she said.

"Shortly."

"I guess some chicken sounds okay."

"KFC?"

"Get some at the deli at Publix. And some macaroni salad."

"Okay."

"So what have you been doing all afternoon?"

"Working," I said. "Ordering some things online, balancing the checkbook, running errands. Stuff like that. And then a while ago a student came in, and I ended up giving him a lesson."

"What student?"

"Terry Vine. Did I ever tell you about him?"

"Yeah, you talk about him all the time. You always say he reminds you of yourself at that age. But I thought you didn't schedule any students on Fridays."

"Special circumstances," I said.

I explained why Terry had come in, and that I had forgotten about agreeing to the Friday lesson.

"Okay," Juliet said. "Well, see you in a little while then."

"Bye."

I shut everything down, grabbed the envelope and headed out. The attorney's office was in another strip mall about three miles from my studio, and before I hit the halfway point I noticed someone else was tailing me. I made some unnecessary turns to make sure. They weren't going about it aggressively this time, but I was definitely being followed. Maybe it was Diana. I hoped it was. I hoped she would get in touch with me sometime before the night was over.

By the time I reached the strip mall, there was a fat yellow moon rising over the stand of pines behind the buildings. I parked and got out and walked up to the attorney's storefront. All the lights were off. Apparently the lawyer who ran the place was long gone for the day. The metal plate on the lower right side of the door said DROP BOX in

big red letters. I opened it and dropped the little padded envelope into the chute.

The car that had been shadowing me was on the other side of the parking lot. It wasn't Diana. It was a man. He'd gotten out of his black Jeep Cherokee and was pretending to look at a 1966 Ford Fairlane with a FOR SALE sign in the window. It was dark, and there were fifty yards of asphalt between us, so I couldn't make out his features. But it was definitely a man. Either that or Diana had grown a beard and a set of biceps as big as hams.

I thought about walking over there and talking to him, but I didn't.

I figured he was working with Diana. That was the only explanation. Nobody else had a reason to secretly follow me around. Maybe he was there to protect me. Maybe he was the one who had shanked Von Lepstein.

I didn't want to blow his cover, so I didn't go talk to him. He was actually pretty good at what he was doing. Most people would have never noticed the tail. But Nicholas Colt wasn't most people. Nicholas Colt had been a licensed private investigator for a lot of years, and he knew when he was being followed.

Now Nicholas Colt was a secret agent, and he was starting to like it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I didn't hear from Diana Dawkins again until Monday. I picked up the mail when I got to the studio, and there was another package from her. It was in an envelope disguised as a life insurance offer this time. I took it inside and stood at the counter and opened it.

She wanted me to bring the briefcase and the cell phone and all the Perry Wendell Davis credentials to the safe house. To the little concrete block bungalow where she'd tricked me into thinking I was going to be tortured and killed. Tonight at nine o'clock, she said. She made it clear how crucial it was for her to get those things back, along with Von Lepstein's wallet.

Friday evening I'd set the briefcase on the floor behind the counter. I turned, reached with my right hand, expecting it to be there where I'd left it, but it was not.

The briefcase was gone.

I started looking around, wondering if I'd moved it at some point. I looked everywhere. I combed the front counter and the waiting area and the studio room, but it was nowhere to be found. Someone had stolen it. That was the only explanation.

My stomach tightened, and I started having a little trouble breathing. For a minute I thought I might be having a heart attack. Diana had stressed the importance of getting the briefcase and its contents back to her. If any of that Perry Wendell Davis stuff fell into the wrong hands, it could possibly jeopardize the secrecy of her organization. And secrecy, she said, was everything. The security of our country depended on it.

I'd screwed up. I'd carelessly left the case at the studio, right there behind the counter where anyone could have walked back and snatched it. I'd practically invited someone to take it.

Now I needed to get it back. Somehow.

I tried to construct a list of suspects. Friday evening I'd locked everything up, and then I'd delivered the padded envelope containing the lipstick camera to the attorney's office. I'd stopped for chicken on the way home, and I hadn't gone back to the studio until the next morning. I hadn't gone back until I went in and opened up in time for my first Saturday student.

Saturday is my busiest day of the week. I have twelve students, all in a row. Six solid hours of guitar lessons. Had the briefcase been there Saturday morning when I unlocked the door and disabled the alarm? I didn't know. I hadn't really thought about it since I set it behind the counter Friday.

I went down the list of my Saturday students. Two of them had cancelled, so that left ten. Of those, seven were too young to drive and depended on one of their parents or someone else for a ride. That meant at least seventeen people had walked in and out of my business on Saturday.

But I had been right there with them most of the time. The counter only went unattended while I was in the studio room with a student, and from there the light over the door alerted me when anyone came through the front entrance. I couldn't think of a single instance where anyone would have been alone in front long enough to steal the briefcase.

And then it came to me.

Nobody had stolen the briefcase Saturday, because it hadn't been there Saturday.

If it had been behind the counter Saturday morning, I would have noticed it. Seeing it would have reminded me to lock it in my car, or at least to hide it somewhere in the studio.

Since the time I set it on the floor behind the counter, only one person had been out of my sight long enough to have made a grab for it.

That one person had been there Friday, not Saturday.

That one person was Terry Vine.

I couldn't believe it. Terry was such a good kid. Why would he have stolen my briefcase? I'd said something that upset him, so maybe taking it was his way of retaliating. The case was locked, so he probably never even opened it. I couldn't imagine him cracking into it with a sledgehammer or something. He would have known it wasn't full of hundred dollar bills.

I couldn't believe Terry had done such a thing, but there was no other explanation. I felt like an idiot. The briefcase was gone, and the guy who'd taken it was three thousand miles away in California.

I doubted he'd taken it with him. He might have just whizzed it into a dumpster somewhere. I hoped he hadn't done anything like that, but it was always a possibility. I needed to know, and I needed to know before my nine o'clock meeting with Diana Dawkins.

Terry was the only kid I knew who didn't have a cell phone. Darrel, his stepfather, refused to put Terry on his plan, and Terry wasn't old enough to open his own account. Not that he had enough money to pay the bill anyway, not after Darrell commandeered most of his paycheck.

Darrell had legally adopted Terry. That's why Terry's last name was Vine and not something else. I had no idea what Terry's real dad's name was, but maybe Darrell would help me out. I found his address and phone number on the information sheet Terry had filled out

before starting lessons with me. Terry had listed Darrel as his emergency contact. I gave him a call. No answer. I left a message.

My first student walked in, but I was too ruffled to give anyone a guitar lesson. A thousand fire ants marched through my nervous system, digging and gnawing and doing the watusi in a continuous loop. If I didn't get that briefcase back, it was going to be my ass.

I apologized to my student for having to cancel, and then left a note on the door before heading over to Darrell Vine's house.

It wasn't far, less than a mile. Terry usually walked to his guitar lesson from there. I pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. There weren't any other cars around, and the blinds were closed on all the windows. Not good signs. I walked up to the porch and knocked, but as I suspected there was nobody home.

"Looking for somebody?"

I turned to my left and saw an elderly gentleman next door retrieving a newspaper from his front steps. He wore a burgundy bathrobe over a T-shirt and a pair of pajama bottoms. Faux leather slippers. He hadn't combed his stringy white hair yet, even though it was past eleven o'clock.

"Darrell Vine," I said. "You know where I might find him?"

"They moved a while back. Not sure where to."

"How long they been gone?" I said.

"A few months, I reckon. Nobody's living there now. The place is in foreclosure."

"All right. Thanks."

He said something about how bad the neighborhood had gotten as I walked back toward my car.

Terry never told me they had moved. He was probably embarrassed about it. Now I didn't know what to do.

I was anxious, feeling a little shaky, and I thought some food might help. I stopped at McDonald's and ordered two Big Macs and a small order of fries. Juliet was always harping on me about eating healthier, so I skipped the soda and chose a bottle of spring water.

While I was there, I opened my netbook and tried to find Darrell Vine's new address. No luck. He and Terry were probably staying with a friend or relative. That was my guess.

As far as I knew, Darrell didn't have a job, so there was no way for me to track him through an employer. Terry *did* have a job, and he went to school, but it would have taken a court order for me to get his current address through either of those places, and that just wasn't going to happen.

I was out of ideas. I needed to know Terry's father's name. I needed to contact Terry and talk to him about the missing briefcase. There was no way I could wait until a week from Thursday, when he would

come back in for his regular lesson. According to Diana Dawkins, national security was at stake. No telling what kind of damage might be done by then.

I decided to try the information line at Edwards Air Force Base. It was my last hope. It was a longshot, but I had nothing to lose.

"Edwards. Staff Sergeant Baker speaking, advising you that this is an unsecure line. How may I help you today?"

"My name's Nicholas Colt, and I'm looking for a young man named Terry Vine. His father is stationed there at Edwards."

"Vine, you say?"

"Yeah. That's the kid. But his dad has a different last name."

"What's his father's name?" Sergeant Baker said.

"I don't know. That's the problem."

"Officer or enlisted?"

I remembered Terry telling me his dad had recently been promoted to E-something or another. Some kind of supervisory position among the lower ranks.

"Enlisted," I said.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to help you, unless you can come up with a last name."

"It's urgent. He took something of mine, and it's important that I get it back. It's a matter of life and death."

"There's really nothing I can do, sir."

I wondered if Staff Sergeant Baker would have been more helpful if Terry was an officer's kid.

"There must be something," I said. "How many enlisted guys are stationed there?"

"I don't know exactly. A few thousand, I suppose. How old is the kid you're looking for?"

"Fifteen."

"If he has social media accounts, you might try that."

"Good idea," I said. "Thank you."

I hung up, clicked here and there and tapped a few keys and found Terry right away. His information was blocked, so I sent him a message:

Terry, I know about the briefcase. I need it back as soon as possible. Please call me on my cell phone. If you have the briefcase with you, I'll wire you the money to ship it back here overnight. If you don't have it with you, please call me and tell me where I can find it. No hard feelings. I promise. Thanks.

—NC

Now all I could do was wait.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I met Diana at the safe house at nine o'clock. She was sitting at the table I'd been strapped to, doing something on a laptop and drinking coffee. I poured myself a cup, sat a cross from her and handed her Von Lepstein's wallet, along with the Perry Wendell Davis social security card and birth certificate I'd retrieved from the gun locker in the Airstream.

"Where's the rest of the stuff?" she said.

"I don't have it."

"What do you mean you don't have it?"

"I put it all in the briefcase, and then the briefcase was stolen."

She looked at me in disbelief for a few seconds, and then she got up and started pacing.

"This is not good, Nicholas. This is not good at all. I thought I could trust you. I thought you knew how important it was to safeguard those credentials."

"I'm sorry. I am trying to get them back."

"How?"

I told her about suspecting Terry Vine, and about leaving him a message.

"I'm sure he'll call me soon," I said. "Maybe any minute now."

"You're sure he'll call you soon? Well I'm *not* sure he'll call you soon, or ever, and I can't sit around waiting on a maybe. Did you forget my core mission here? To find out who's trying to frame me, and to thwart an assassination attempt on the president? I don't have time for—"

"I haven't forgotten anything," I said. "But I would like to know some things. Like what happened with Von Lepstein. He chases me down, and I'm standing there talking to him, and the next thing I know he's lying there with a shank in his back."

"He was on to you. Or at least he thought he was. He had to be eliminated."

"How was he on to me? How is that possible? The inspection went like clockwork."

"The maintenance man called Von Lepstein and told him you were screwing around with the ceiling tile in the bathroom. I was listening in on the bug you planted. Von Lepstein called one of his contacts at the DOD and found out that Perry Wendell Davis—the real Perry Wendell Davis—was transferred to an office in North Dakota. Von Lepstein thought you were a corporate spy. If he'd just reported the suspected fraud to the police, everything would have been okay. You

would have turned the rental car in and disappeared, and there would have been no way to trace you. But he had to try to be a hero. He had to play the big bad cowboy CEO, large and in charge, and chase you down himself. His fat ego got him killed.”

“So who killed Von Lepstein?” I said.

“That’s not important. We made it look like he was robbed by a homeless person.”

“That’s what I thought. But how did you get the grocery cart full of clothes there so quickly?”

“You’ve got it backwards, Nicholas. The cart just happened to be there, so we used it to our advantage. We used it to create the scenario. If it had been an ice cream truck, we would have used that. We’re good at improvising with the materials at hand. I thought you would have figured that out by now.”

“I’m finding it hard to figure anything out. Whenever it seems like I might be getting a handle on it, there’s a new twist. Von Lepstein was one of our suspects, right? One of the five with access to the safe. Now that he’s dead—”

“We’re down to four,” Diana said. “The CPSO, the project manager, one of the two engineers with access, or a combination. I’ll need your help again, to take a closer look at them, and we’ll need to get started right away. The bug you planted will still be useful, because the project manager will serve as the interim CEO until they hire someone to replace Von Lepstein.”

“Won’t they be looking for things like that, now that they know someone infiltrated the plant?”

“It has the latest anti-detection circuitry. I doubt they’ll ever find it. If they do, they do. I’m already working on some other surveillance ideas.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I can continue with this. Really. There are just too many pieces to the puzzle. I’m lost.”

“Everything’s under control,” she said. “That’s all you need to know. Everything except that briefcase containing the phony credentials. I’m sure you can see where that might throw a monkey wrench into the works.”

“Yeah.”

“We can’t wait for a phone call. You’re going to have to fly out to California and get that briefcase, Nicholas.”

“That’s one of the problems,” I said. “I don’t know how to find Terry Vine. I know he’s somewhere on Edwards Air Force Base, but I don’t know his father’s last name. I could fly out there and hang around, but there are thousands of enlisted people and the odds of running into Terry would be—”

“Shut up,” Diana said, her irritation level kicking up about three

notches. "Just shut up for a minute. Did he say anything about doing any touristy stuff while he was out there? Surely he's not just going to be stuck on the base the whole time."

"He said his dad was going to take him to Los Angeles, and to Disneyland, but I don't have any idea which days they're going to be in those places."

"Great. Just great. Do you have any idea how incredibly messed up this is? Do you?"

Diana was still pacing back and forth, wringing her hands now, looking extremely agitated, like she might blow a gasket any minute.

"Wait a minute," I said. "He said something about a motocross meet. At the Rose Bowl. That can't be a regular thing, right? It's probably just one day."

Diana sat down at the laptop and started typing frantically.

"It's tomorrow at four in the afternoon," she said, talking and keying the computer at the same time. "Here's what you're going to do. You're going to fly out to LA tonight, and from there you're going to rent a car and drive to Pasadena. You're going to stay at a hotel, and you're going to go to that race tomorrow. You're going to walk every inch of that stadium until you find Terry Vine. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm making all the reservations and ticket purchases as we speak. Before you drive to Pasadena, you'll need to stop at Union Station and locate locker number eleven-thirty-two. That's one-one-three-two. Inside the locker you'll find a black nylon tote bag. Inside the tote bag you'll find a Glock nine-millimeter and two extra magazines. And before you ask me how quickly I arranged for *that*, I'll just go ahead and tell you: it was already there. The Circle has supplies hidden for its operatives all over the country. If you had been following Terry Vine to Topeka, Kansas, for example, I would have given you a locker number at the bus station, and you would have picked your gun up there."

"Why do I even need a gun?" I said.

"Why do you even need a gun? Let me tell you: if Terry Vine has seen the contents of that briefcase, you're going to have to kill him."

Diana rushed me to the airport and dropped me off at the terminal. There was no time to go home and pack a bag, she said. I would be flying to California with nothing but the clothes on my back. I didn't even have a toothbrush.

I picked up my ticket and my boarding pass and made my way through security. The plane wasn't scheduled to start boarding for another thirty minutes, so I decided to give my wife a call. I used one of the payphones at the gate and called collect.

"Yes, I'll accept the charges," Juliet said to the operator. A click,

and then, "Nicholas, what on earth are you doing?"

"I'm not going to be home tonight," I said. "I just wanted to let you know."

"Where are you? Why are you not coming home?"

"I have to fly to California. I'm at the airport."

"California? Nicholas, what's going on? And why did you call collect? Why didn't you—"

"I can't explain right now. I've gotten myself into something that I can't talk about. Everything's going to be all right. Just trust me, okay?"

Her voice broke. "This is just bizarre," she said. "I don't know what to think. You need to tell me why you're going to California, and why you didn't use your cell phone to call me. I'm tired of all the secrets, and all the lies. Someone has been calling here and hanging up. Do you know anything about that?"

"No."

Silence. Someone was waiting for the phone, an old man in a business suit. He was standing there with his arms folded across his chest.

I turned away.

"Jules, listen. This is all going to—"

"I know you went out last Sunday night," she said. "I heard you when you came in, and I heard you taking a shower. Would you like to explain that to me?"

Busted. Juliet could sleep through a hurricane, but she always seems to wake up when anything's awry with a friend or family member. One time she abruptly bolted out of bed at two-something in the morning, and five minutes later she got a call from the Philippines. Her uncle had died. Ten thousand miles away. I should have known she'd be on to me for the lengthy disappearance last Sunday night.

"If I tell you anything, we'll both be in grave danger," I said. "That's why I used the payphone just now. I'm pretty sure they're listening in on my cell phone."

She started crying.

"Who, Nicholas? Who's listening? I think I have a right to know."

The Circle, I wanted to say. I wanted to tell her everything, but I couldn't.

"I can't tell you," I said. "I can never tell you."

"Then you just stay in California. Don't even bother coming home, okay? Because I can't take this anymore."

She hung up on me. I tried calling her back, but she wouldn't answer.

And it broke my heart.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I made it to the Rose Bowl at 3:15 Tuesday afternoon, forty-five minutes before the race was scheduled to start. I parked in Lot F and picked up my ticket at the WILL CALL booth.

"You're in section twelve," the guy at the window said. "All the way on the other side of the stadium."

"Figures. How many people does this thing hold, anyway?"

"Over a hundred thousand, but we're not expecting that kind of crowd today. Maybe a quarter of that if we're lucky."

"Good to know," I said. "Thanks."

I entered through Gate B and started the long trek to my assigned seat. When I got close, I stood in line at one of the concession stands and bought a hot dog and a beer.

I ate and drank as I walked. I'd taken a shower at the hotel, but I still had yesterday's clothes on. I wanted to hurry up and find Terry so I could go somewhere and buy something new.

The Glock was tucked into the waistband of my pants, hidden under my shirttails. I'd left the extra magazines in the rental car's glove compartment. I didn't need them. I wasn't walking into battle. It would only take one shot to kill Terry Vine—if he had opened the briefcase. If he hadn't, I wouldn't need the gun at all.

On the drive to the airport, I'd asked Diana if there was any other way. I certainly didn't want to shoot a fifteen-year-old kid. Not if there was any way around it. But Diana made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that Terry would have to die if he'd seen the phony credentials. If he'd seen them, he would be a security risk for the rest of his life. He would be able to associate the name Perry Wendell Davis, now under investigation because of the Aero-Fleck incident, with the name Nicholas Colt, and Diana wasn't willing to take that chance.

In a way, it was Terry's own fault. He never should have stolen the briefcase. He knew better. His mother was locked away for writing bad checks, and his stepfather was a lowlife drunk, but he still knew better. Now he was possibly going to have to pay the ultimate price for one stupid mistake. What a waste. I kept hoping he hadn't opened the briefcase. I didn't want to kill him.

I found section twelve and climbed up to my seat. There weren't any ushers on duty. I guessed the crowd was too sparse to warrant the expense. I was glad. It meant I could move around freely without pretending to be lost every five minutes.

I had a decent view of the track, even though it was positioned more toward the other side of the stadium. It was oval, all dirt, with

plenty of places for the bikes to get airborne. The riders wore colorful leather coveralls and matching plastic helmets that gleamed like shiny glass marbles under the California sun. I watched them warm up for a while, whizzing around the track and taking the jumps with what seemed like effortless precision. They zoomed up the ramps, arcing forward and crunching down nonchalantly on the other side. Invincible. I could remember feeling that way, a long time ago. Then life comes along and sticks its foot up your ass and you watch your loved ones disappear in a cloud of smoke. And the years roll by and you wonder about what could have been. You wonder what your little girl would look like now.

I guessed big-time motocross wasn't all that different from big-time music or big-time anything. You either went at it a hundred percent, with reckless abandon, or you faded into oblivion while someone with more connections and bigger balls took your place. And you did it early, while you were young and fast and a little stupid. *Carpe diem*, as they say. Broken bones and broken hearts don't heal so fast when you get older.

I sucked down the last few lukewarm ounces of beer from my cup, got up and started walking around. The stadium was massive, but the upper tiers were mostly empty. With so many vacant seats up front, and no ushers guarding the aisles, it would have been foolish for anyone to stay in the nosebleeds. There was still a lot of ground to cover, but at least I knew my needle was somewhere in the haystack. Terry Vine was in the stadium, and it was only a matter of time until I found him.

"Welcome, race fans, to the one and only Rose Bowl in beautiful Pasadena, California..."

The announcer started jabbering over the PA system, and for a minute I thought about having Terry paged. I decided against it. They would undoubtedly ask me my name, and they would probably blast it over the loudspeakers for all to hear. *Attention Terry Vine. Please meet Nicholas Colt at the first-aid station as soon as possible.* I didn't want twenty-five thousand people knowing I'd been at the Rose Bowl today. Especially if the kid who got summonsed ended up with a bullet in his head. It was going to be hard enough to get out of there as it was. On the way to my seat, I'd seen three uniformed police officers wandering around by the restrooms, and I'd seen some other guys in suits carrying walkie-talkies. Security wasn't exactly tight, but it wasn't nonexistent either. I needed to watch myself.

I climbed and descended the aisles, looking left and right as I went. The race had started and the motorcycles were loud and nobody was paying any attention to me.

The Glock had a sound suppressor attached to the barrel, so I

doubted anyone would notice the pop if I had to use it. It would be like firing into a pillow. No louder than a hand clap.

I made it to section eighteen before I stopped and took a break. I sat in the front row and watched the riders fly around on their motorcycles for a few minutes. These were probably the most expensive seats during football season. Right on the fifty yard line, and on the west side of the stadium. Facing away from the afternoon sun. They were the best seats for football, but the motocross track was situated more toward the south. Sections twenty-four through twenty-eight had the best view, and that was where much of the crowd had clustered. I had a feeling that was where I would find Terry. Somewhere in those sections on the south side.

I continued my search, wondering if I might have gone by Terry's seat while he wasn't in it. I saw several guys sitting alone, guys who could have been his dad. Maybe Terry had gone for some nachos and a soda. It occurred to me that I might have to walk the stadium more than once. I wondered if there would even be time. I wasn't sure how long the motocross meet lasted. If I made it all the way around and still hadn't spotted him, I would have to start over. I was getting depressed just thinking about it.

By the time I reached section twenty-one, the sixteen-ounce beer had worked its way through me and was screaming to get out. I found the nearest alcove and walked inside. There were a few people milling around, but not many. I didn't see any cops. The concession workers looked bored.

I made it to the restroom and did my business. I stepped to the basin to wash my hands, and when I looked in the mirror I saw Terry Vine standing there behind me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Our eyes met in the mirror. Terry looked at my reflection, and I looked at his. The boy I saw could have been me at fifteen. Same blue eyes, same sandy blond hair, same skinny build. He was even wearing bell bottom jeans and a wide belt and a puka shell necklace. We were alone.

“Mr. Colt?”

“Hi Terry.”

“What are you doing here?” he said.

“I need to talk to you about something.”

“You came all the way to California to talk to me about something?”

“It’s important,” I said.

“Wow. Hang on. I gotta go really bad.”

He ducked into one of the stalls and locked the door.

I stood there and looked at myself in the mirror for a few seconds. I looked rough. My skin was pale, and I had dark circles under my eyes. My hair looked like it had been dried with a leaf blower. I was starting to get more and more gray ones, on my head and on my face. My clothes were a mess.

Suddenly, I didn’t feel very well at all. I felt weak and shaky and nauseated. Like I needed a fix. Like I was going through heroin withdrawal, even though I hadn’t used the stuff in years.

I was worn out. I needed rest. I needed to crawl into my bed at the hotel and stay there for a couple of days.

Terry was still locked in the stall.

“I need to talk to you about that briefcase,” I said.

“What briefcase?”

“Cut the bullshit, Terry. I know you took it.”

“All right, so I took it. Big deal. It’s just a briefcase. Who comes all the way to California over something like that? It’s not like I burned your house down or anything.”

“Why did you take it?” I said.

“I don’t know. Just seemed like the thing to do at the time. I got kind of pissed when you asked how long it had been since I’ve seen my dad. It’s just a briefcase, man. You can have it back.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s in my room back in Florida. Where me and Darrel are staying. It’s in the closet, back behind some other things.”

“Where are you and Darrel staying?” I said.

“His cousin’s place.”

“I need an address.”

Terry told me the address. I wrote it down with the pen and notepad I'd taken from the hotel. I read it back to him to make sure it was correct. A few seconds later, I heard him spooling off some toilet paper.

"California's pretty cool," he said. "I'm thinking about moving out here and staying with my dad. He's trying to work it out with the lawyers and all. Wouldn't that be great?"

"Yeah. That would be great. I need to ask you one more thing, Terry."

"Okay."

"Did you open the—"

He flushed the toilet in the middle of my sentence. I was waiting for the noise to die down when he opened the door and stepped out of the stall.

He walked over and turned the water on to wash his hands.

"Sorry," he said. "Could you repeat that?"

I hesitated. I didn't want to hit him with the question I'd flown all the way to California to ask, because I was afraid of what the answer might be. If Terry had seen those phony credentials, I was going to have to pull my pistol out and drill a nine-millimeter slug into his brain. I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to hit him with the question, but I didn't have a choice. I had to know.

"Did you open the briefcase?" I said.

He yanked a few paper towels from the dispenser on the wall, looked at me with those beautiful blue eyes of his.

"Did I open it? Why do you ask?"

"I have to know," I said.

"What's the big deal?"

"Terry, it's a yes or no question. Did you or did you not open the briefcase?"

He shrugged. "I did not open your stupid briefcase," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Why? You got some weed stashed in there or something?"

"Just some things I don't want anyone to see. Some private papers."

"I didn't open it. It was locked, and I didn't want to tear it up. I was planning on giving it back next time I saw you. Sorry I caused you all this trouble."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I'll fly back to Florida tonight, and I'll stop by the address you gave me first thing in the morning. No harm, no foul. But do me a favor. Call your stepfather and tell him I'm coming, so he'll know to expect me."

"Sure. Want to come and hang out with me and my dad for a while?"

"Thanks, but I better get going. You enjoy your time with your dad.

Oh, and is there a phone number where I can reach you if I need to?"

He told me his father's number. I wrote it down.

"Have a good vacation," I said.

"All right. Well, see you later, Mr. Colt."

"See you later, Terry."

He tossed the paper towels into the trash barrel and exited the restroom. I felt like celebrating. Now I knew the location of the briefcase, and I wasn't going to have to kill my favorite student.

I looked in the mirror and smiled at myself. I was about to turn for the door and find my way out of the stadium when my cell phone vibrated. The caller ID said Juliet. I picked up.

"Hello?"

"Who's Perry Wendell Davis?" she said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I told Juliet not to say another word. Not over the phone. But she didn't listen. She started crying and accusing me of using the Perry Wendell Davis alias for extramarital affairs. For checking into hotels. For fancy dinners and such. Apparently I had a woman in Jacksonville, and one in California, and no telling how many others all across the country. She was livid, her suspicions sounding more and more delusional with every passing second. There was no reasoning with her, so I finally just had to hang up.

Juliet had hired a private investigator. I got that much out of her before I hung up. But how he had found out about Perry Wendell Davis was still a mystery. I couldn't imagine. Everything that had to do with Inspector Davis was either in the briefcase, or in the gun locker in my camper. The briefcase was at Darrel Vine's cousin's house, hidden in Terry's bedroom closet, and I'd hand delivered the other things to Diana last night. There was no way a PI could have gotten to any of it.

And yet he had. Max Marlin. I wasn't familiar with the name, but I would most certainly have some questions for him when I got back to Florida. Juliet said he was in the hospital with two broken ankles, so he wouldn't be hard to find.

On the way back to the hotel I stopped and bought a pair of khaki cargo pants and a black polo. Pack of socks, pack of underwear. I bought some deodorant and a Three Musketeers bar and a humongous roast beef sub wrapped in cellophane. I was standing in the checkout line when I decided some beer would be good, so I went back and grabbed a six pack.

I drove to the hotel, took the elevator to my room on the third floor. I drank two of the beers and took a long hot shower. By the time I towed off and got dressed, it was almost eight o'clock. I ate as much of the sandwich as I could stomach, threw the rest in the trash along with my original set of clothes. I felt better than I had all day. My head was clear and my body was clean. I opened another beer and was about halfway through it when the phone on the bedside table rang. I walked over and sat on the bed and picked up the receiver.

"This is Colt," I said.

"It's me," Diana said. "How did it go?"

"Great. I found Terry, and he admitted to taking the briefcase."

"Did you get it?"

"It's in Florida. I'm going to pick it up tomorrow. Terry never opened it, so I didn't need the Glock. I put it back in the locker at

Union Station.”

“Good. I’m glad you didn’t need it. I want you to meet me at the safe house again tomorrow night. I have some things I need to go over with you, some new developments. And of course I’ll need you to bring me the briefcase.”

“Same time?” I said.

“Right. Twenty-one hundred.”

“Okay.”

We disconnected. I finished my beer, and then I brushed my teeth and splashed on some aftershave. I checked out of the hotel, dropped the rental car off, walked to the terminal at LAX. Most people would have taken a cab. It was a long walk, probably half a mile, but I had plenty of time. My flight wasn’t scheduled to depart until twelve-fifteen. I didn’t have any luggage and it was a beautiful night and I enjoyed the walk.

Maybe Diana wasn’t monitoring my phone calls after all. She hadn’t said anything about Juliet. That was my greatest fear now, that Juliet had somehow seen the phony Perry Wendell Davis credentials. If she had, and if Diana found out about it, Juliet’s life would be in danger. Surely Diana wouldn’t expect me to kill my own wife, but the problem would be taken care of one way or another. Like the problem with Kurt Von Lepstein had been taken care of.

I tried to call Juliet on my walk to the terminal, hoping she had calmed down enough for me to get some explanations. She didn’t answer, so I left a message:

“Hey babe, it’s me. Whatever you do, don’t tell anyone anything about Perry Wendell Davis. Not your sister, not your best friend, nobody. Don’t even say the name out loud. I’m very serious about this, Jules. Your life, and the life of anyone you talk to, could be in jeopardy. I’ll explain when I get home. Love you.”

The redeye east launched as scheduled. I normally can’t sleep on airplanes, even long flights, but for some reason I didn’t have a problem this time. I didn’t wake up until we landed in Atlanta at five-thirty in the morning. I caught my connecting flight, and when the plane landed in Jacksonville, I took a cab to Diana’s safe house where my Jimmy was parked. I was on my way to Orange Park by 9:00 a.m.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I drove to the address Terry had given me. I mounted the porch and rang the bell, and a few seconds later an elderly woman with bright orange hair and a shotgun answered.

She talked to me through the screen door.

"What do you want?" she said.

She held the gun like a hunter walking through the woods might, with the barrel angled toward the ground. There was a cigarette dangling from her thin and wrinkled lips.

"I'm looking for Darrel Vine," I said.

"Ain't nobody by that name here."

"Are you his cousin?"

She laughed. "This is Florida, mister. We're all cousins, don't you know. But I ain't never heard of no Darrel Vine. My sister used to go out with a Bobby Vine. Almost married the asshole. But I ain't never heard of no Darrel."

"I must have gotten the address wrong," I said.

"Must have. Maybe someone by that name lives around here, but I probably wouldn't know it if they did. I pretty much keep to myself. I don't bother nobody as long as they don't bother me."

"Do you always come to the door with a shotgun?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry about that. I was just giving it a good cleaning. Guess it didn't appear too friendly, did it?"

The ash fell from her cigarette. She ground it into the carpet with her foot.

"Thanks for your time," I said. "Sorry to have bothered you."

"Have a good one."

"Yeah. You too."

She closed the door. I walked back to my car, climbed in and started the engine. I sat there for a while, wondering why Terry had lied to me. I hadn't gotten the address wrong. This was the number Terry had given me. I was a hundred percent certain of that. I'd written it down, and then I'd read it back to him. He'd given me the wrong address on purpose.

Or maybe he'd gotten mixed up on the house number. It was just a temporary living situation, after all. Maybe Terry had made an honest mistake. I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but when I tried the California phone number he'd given me for his dad, that wasn't any good either. A recording told me the number had been disconnected.

For some reason, Terry Vine had purposefully given me bogus

information.

I was supposed to meet Diana at the safe house at twenty-one hundred. 9:00 p.m. I was supposed to bring the briefcase, but suddenly I wasn't any closer to having it in my hands than before I went to California. I'd wasted a lot of time and money. Diana was going to be furious.

I hadn't thought to ask Terry his dad's name, so I was back to square one. No way to locate him on the air force base. Maybe Diana would just go ahead and execute me tonight. Maybe in her world stupidity was a capital offense.

I couldn't think of any more ways to try to solve the briefcase mystery, so I decided to go have a word with Max Marlin, the private investigator Juliet had hired. He'd been admitted to the hospital, which was only a few blocks away. Unless Juliet had lied to me as well, but I couldn't think of any reason she would have wanted to. Not about that, anyway.

I backed out of the driveway and headed toward the hospital. I just hoped they hadn't discharged him yet.

I got lucky. He was still there.

The lady at the information desk said he was on the orthopedics unit. I took the elevator to the fourth floor and then wandered around until I finally found it. I stopped at the nurses' station, and a very large woman in pink scrubs pointed me in the right direction.

It was a semi-private room at the end of the hall. I walked in and closed the door. Max was in the bed by the window, the one closest to the far wall. He lay there shirtless, eyes closed, listening to something on an iPod. I guessed him to be in his late twenties. Big muscles, like a professional bodybuilder. Both of his legs were in stirrups, and a trapeze handle dangled a couple of feet above his broad and hairless chest. The other bed was vacant. I stood there and stared at him for a minute. He finally opened his eyes and pulled out the ear buds.

"You don't look like a private investigator," I said.

"Who are you?"

"You know who I am."

He squinted at me. "Sorry, I don't have my glasses. They got trashed in the accident. I should have some new ones by later this afternoon."

"Nicholas Colt," I said.

"Shit."

"Yeah. You don't look like a PI, and you're not very good at being one either."

He chuckled, but it came from a nervous place.

"So what's a PI look like?" he said.

"Like me. Strikingly handsome, but not all bulked up from the gym."

“Whatever. Your wife hired me to check you out, Colt. I was just doing my job.”

He grabbed the trapeze and scooted up in the bed a little.

“What do you know about Perry Wendell Davis?” I said.

“Nothing. Just what I saw in the briefcase.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Juliet gave me a key to your studio, and she told me the code to your alarm system. I went in there late Friday night to take a look around. I saw the briefcase, and I wanted to know what was inside. It was locked, and I didn’t want to hang around there long enough to open it, so I took it with me. I was planning to bring it back before you came in Saturday morning, but then some drunken asshole crossed the center line and plowed into me.”

“Where’s the briefcase now?” I said, trying to conceal my astonishment.

“I guess it’s still in the trunk of my car.”

“And where’s that?”

“In the shop. I’m waiting on an estimate for the insurance company. It’s probably going to be totaled.”

“I need you to call there and give me authorization to take the briefcase out of the trunk,” I said.

“Okay. I don’t have a problem with that.”

“Do it now.”

He grabbed his wallet from the bedside table, ferreted through it and pulled out a business card. He lifted the cheap-looking white plastic handset from the nightstand and started punching in numbers.

He glanced up at me. “My cell phone got broke in the wreck too,” he said.

The phone at the auto repair shop must have rung about a thousand times. Someone finally answered, and Max Marlin told them I would be there to get the briefcase out of his trunk. The call lasted less than a minute.

“How long you going to be wearing those casts?” I said.

“Six weeks. Then I’ll be in braces another six. My leg muscles are going to atrophy down to nothing, man. It’ll take me a year to get them back in shape. But the guy who hit me has money, and I’m suing his ass. I might never have to work again.”

“If you do ever work again, don’t work on me,” I said. “Unless you want some more broken bones.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I drove to the repair shop and got the briefcase. I opened it and checked to make sure everything was still there. It felt good to have it in my possession. Tonight I would give it back to Diana and be done with it.

I couldn't believe Terry Vine had deceived me that way. He'd even come up with a fake address and phone number. But why? I'd always been good to him. I'd loaned him a very nice guitar, and I was giving him free lessons. I was probably the only adult in his life who actually cared about him. Terry and I were going to have to sit down for a nice long talk when he got back from California. He was a good kid, but I couldn't tolerate him messing with my mind like that. The time had come to lay down the law.

I locked the briefcase and set it on the rear floorboard and headed for home. It was going on noon by the time I got there.

Juliet was outside planting some flowers in one of the rock beds at the front of our house. She wore jeans and a big straw hat and gardening gloves. She glanced up when I pulled into the driveway, then went back to what she was doing.

I got out of the car and walked up behind her.

"Those are nice," I said, referring to the flowers.

She mumbled something.

"I've been all the way to California and back," I said. "Can I get a hug, or at least a *welcome home* or something?"

"I told you to stay in California."

"But you didn't mean it. You love me, and you want me here with you."

She stood and faced me. There were tears in her eyes.

"Why have you been lying to me?" she said.

"We have some things to talk about. Let's go inside."

She followed me inside to the kitchen. I asked if she wanted me to make a pot of coffee. She didn't, so I decided to settle for instant. I heated some water and spooned in some grounds and sat across from her at the table.

"I'm listening," she said.

"First of all, what I'm going to tell you is—"

Before I said *in strict confidence*, it occurred to me that Diana might have planted some listening devices in our home. I didn't think so, but I didn't want to take any chances. I motioned for Juliet to follow me. I led her to the bathroom and closed the door and turned the shower on. The noise from the water running would effectively cover our

voices, especially if we whispered. I turned it on cold so the room wouldn't get steamy.

"What is this all about, Nicholas?"

"We need to keep our voices down, in case someone's listening."

"Who would be listening? I gave Max Marlin the go-ahead to bug your studio, but not our house."

"He bugged my studio?" I said.

I didn't know whether to be emotionally distraught or severely pissed. I decided to let it go for the moment.

"Do you have something to tell me or not?" Juliet said.

"All right, here I go. My new student, the one who called a week ago Sunday and gave me two hundred dollars to skip breakfast, isn't really a student at all. Her name's Diana Dawkins, and she's an operative for a clandestine government organization called The Circle. Very few people even know this agency exists, Jules. Their mission is to track and eliminate enemies of the United States. Because of some of my past investigations, I was considered a potential recruit, and that's why Diana came to me. She's in trouble."

Juliet had a doubtful expression on her face.

"What kind of trouble?" she said.

"Someone is planning to assassinate the president, and they're planning to frame Diana for the crime. She thinks it might even be someone within her own organization, so she doesn't know who she can trust. She offered me a very large sum of money to help her, and I couldn't turn it down. Well, I could have, but I didn't want to. It's enough to change our lives."

"This is the best that you can come up with?" Juliet said. "That you're working for a secret agent? Don't make me laugh, Nicholas. You think I'm stupid? You think I was born yesterday?"

"It's true," I said. "It's all true. I used the phony Perry Wendell Davis credentials to inspect a company called Aero-Fleck Audio. I smuggled out pictures of coded documents. All top secret. I'm not making this up. This is really happening, and if you ever utter a word of it to anyone—"

"Where's all this money she's paying you?"

"I'll get it after the job is finished. I even have a tattoo between my toes on my left foot. It's a little red dot. They call it the blood tattoo, and there's a microchip implanted beneath the skin there."

Juliet laughed. "Okay, I'll bite. Let me see this blood tattoo of yours."

"You can only see it under a special light," I said.

"Of course. A special light. How convenient. Do you know how incredibly ridiculous all this sounds, Nicholas? Do you even know?"

"I know it sounds crazy. But it's the truth."

“Why did you go to California?” she said. “To see *her*? To see Alana?”

“I thought we were over that. I thought we agreed never to mention it again.”

“But you keep lying. What am I supposed to think?”

“You’re my wife. You’re supposed to believe me. I went out there to find Terry Vine. I thought he’d taken the briefcase containing the Perry Wendell Davis credentials. It was crucial that I get that stuff back. And like I told you on the message I left last night, you can never, *ever*, tell anyone about Davis. I’m risking both our lives just talking about it now. These are secrets you’re going to have to take to the grave, Jules. Trust me on this.”

“So did you find Terry Vine when you flew out there?”

“Yes. I knew he was going to be at the Rose Bowl yesterday. I was searching the place up and down when I got lucky and ran into him in the men’s room. He didn’t have the briefcase, of course. Max Marlin had it. But I didn’t know that at the time. For some reason, Terry confessed to taking it, and he even gave me an address where I could pick it up. I went to the house he and his stepfather were supposed to be living in, but all I found was some old lady with a bad dye job. Toting a shotgun, no less. Terry’s going to get a piece of my mind when he gets back.”

Juliet smiled, but there were tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Now I know you’re lying,” she said. “About everything.”

“But I’m not. Why can’t you just believe me?”

“You want to know how I know you’re lying?”

I was getting weary with her distrust.

“I’m all ears.” I said.

“I know you’re lying, Nicholas, because Terry Vine doesn’t exist.”

The bathroom was getting stuffy. I reached over and switched on the exhaust fan.

“What are you talking about?” I said. “Of course he exists. He’s my student. I see him every Thursday at four-thirty. I loaned him a guitar.”

“Max looked through your books, and there is no record of payment from anyone named Vine.”

Max. I still couldn’t believe that asshole had violated my space. And the kicker—my own wife had paid him to do it.

“I’ve been carrying Terry for free,” I said. “Because of his home situation. And because, like I mentioned before, he reminds me of myself at that age. He’s a very talented kid. He can go a long way if he sticks with it.”

“I checked on you a few times myself,” she said. “Before I hired Max. Nobody comes to your store at four-thirty on Thursdays. You

disappear into the studio room for thirty minutes, maybe to make secret phone calls or something, but nobody comes and nobody goes. Think about it. Is anyone else ever around when you're with Terry? Has anyone else ever seen him?"

"Of course. Lots of people."

"I checked the high school. There's no student named Terry Vine. There never was. Why don't you just admit it, Nicholas? You invented him. He's a figment of your imagination."

"This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of, Jules. Totally outrageous. I loaned him a guitar. Do you think I imagined *that*?"

"What guitar?" she said.

"The nineteen seventy-four Fender Telecaster Deluxe," I said. "Natural maple finish, two humbuckers. I loaned him that and the hardshell case. I sit there and watch him play it every week."

"Nicholas, you sold that guitar five years ago."

"What?"

I felt my lips begin to tremble. Like a little kid, right before he starts bawling. My vision blurred and the room started spinning and I kept hearing those words over and over again.

You sold that guitar five years ago...

You sold that guitar five years ago...

You sold that guitar five years ago...

The world fell away and a trap door opened beneath me and I fell screaming into a bottomless pit of blackness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I woke up with the worst case of cotton mouth ever. My lips were crusty, my tongue sore. It felt as though someone had sucked me dry with a shop-vac.

I looked around. I was in the hospital. All four side rails on my bed were in the raised position, and my gown was soaked with sweat. There was a pitcher of water on the bedside table, but when I reached for it, I discovered that my wrists and ankles were strapped to the bed frame.

I didn't know why I was there, or why I'd been restrained.

"Hey," I shouted. "Cut me loose. You hear me? I need a drink of water. I need a drink in here. Now!"

My voice was hoarse and raspy, and I wondered if anyone had heard me. I was about to start shouting again when a nurse walked in. She wore blue scrubs and white sneakers. Shoulder-length blond hair. She was very young and pretty. Her nametag said Kim, RN, BSN.

"There's no need to shout," she said. "If you need some help, just press the call button. It's right there on your bedrail."

I looked at the rail. There was a red button that said NURSE CALL, and there was enough play in my wrist restraints to reach it.

"Sorry," I said.

She poured some water into a Styrofoam cup and stripped the paper wrapper off a flexible drinking straw. She raised the head of my bed and held the cup to my mouth. I drained it in three swallows.

"Do you want some more?" she said.

"Yes."

She poured another cup. I drank half of it, and then told her that was enough.

"You were thirsty," she said.

"Thirsty isn't the word. That was good. Thank you."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small plastic bag filled with an intravenous medication. She spiked the bag with a tubing set, primed the tubing and piggybacked the solution into the bag of saline hanging beside my bed on a rolling pole. She adjusted the settings on the electric pump and opened a clamp, and a few seconds later the medication started dripping into a vein on my left arm.

"What's that?" I said.

"It's your antibiotic."

"Am I sick?"

"The doctor thinks you might have an infection. You had a fever yesterday, and the lab came and drew some blood cultures. The doctor

started you on the antibiotic after that.”

“What day is it?” I said.

“Thursday.” She looked at her watch. “It’ll be Friday in a few minutes.”

“Why am I tied up?”

“You don’t remember?”

“No.”

“I didn’t work yesterday, but they told me in report that you had been very combative when you came in. The restraints are for your safety, and for the safety of the staff.”

“Why don’t I remember any of that?”

“They gave you some medication to help you relax. It might have affected your memory.” She paused. “You’ve been asleep for a long time.”

“I hope nobody gave me any narcotic pain medicines.”

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“Because I had a problem with that stuff a while back.”

“Allergic?”

“Addicted.”

“I think it was just some Ativan, but I’ll check. I’ll make a note on your chart and send a message to the doctor and the pharmacy. No narcs. And I need to go over some questions with you, to finish up your admission paperwork. Your wife answered most of it, but there were a few things she didn’t know.”

“I could really go for some coffee,” I said. “Do you think you could take these things off? I’m not combative now.”

I was being extremely polite, but it was an act. More flies with honey and all that. Truth be known, I felt like taking the IV tubing and choking her with it.

I needed a drink. Every cell in my body was screaming for alcohol. I hadn’t had any since the bottles of beer at the hotel in Pasadena.

“If I take the restraints off, you promise to behave yourself?” Kim said.

“Yes. I promise.”

She undid all four of the restraints.

“I’ll see if there’s any coffee,” she said.

“Thanks.”

She left the room. While she was gone, some things started coming back to me. Apparently Terry Vine wasn’t real. I remembered Juliet proving that to me when we were talking in the bathroom at home. It was hard to believe, but the Telecaster Deluxe had been the clincher. When Juliet reminded me that I’d sold the guitar five years ago, the fantasy came crashing down like a house of cards. If the guitar wasn’t real, then Terry wasn’t real.

And if Terry wasn't real, maybe some other things weren't real either.

Like Diana Dawkins.

I reached down and put my finger in the crevice between my left pinky toe and the toe next to it, feeling for any indication that there might be a microchip implanted under the skin.

Nothing.

There was no denying it. I'd lost my mind.

A cheap-looking white plastic handset rested on the nightstand, same as the one in Max Marlin's room. Max Marlin was real. Juliet had seen him. She'd talked to him.

Maybe Max and I were in the same hospital. I pressed the NURSE CALL button, and a male voice came over the intercom.

"May I help you?"

"What hospital is this?" I said. "What floor am I on? What's my room number?"

He told me.

Same hospital as Max, same floor.

"Why am I on the ortho unit?" I said.

"It was the only med/surg bed available. Once you're medically cleared, you'll be transferred up to five."

"What's on five?"

"The psychiatric unit," he said. "Your nurse will be in to talk to you shortly."

I thanked him and he said you're welcome and then the intercom went dead.

I picked up the phone and punched in Winston Fell's cell number. Winston is one of my oldest and dearest friends. I call him Papa. He's a retired cop, twenty years older than me. We go fishing sometimes. We've always gone fishing. It's what we do. We go fishing and we drink beer all day. He's a night owl like me, so I figured he would still be up. He answered on the third ring.

"Hey Papa," I said.

"Nicholas? Long time no see."

"I'm in the hospital."

"What?" He sounded genuinely concerned. "I hope it's nothing serious."

"I'm on the fourth floor right now," I said. "But they're going to transfer me to the psych unit once they rule out any physical problems. Can you imagine that?"

"Sure I can. I've been saying that's where you belong for years."

I laughed. "Listen, I was wondering if you could bring me something."

"What do you want, a woman? I'm not doing it. If I get caught, I'll

have to face the wrath of that feisty little lady of yours. No way.”

Papa was crazy. *He* was the one who belonged on the psych unit.

“I was wondering if you could bring me a pint of bourbon,” I said.

He was silent for a beat.

“You want me to smuggle booze into your hospital room?”

“I need something to take the edge off. You know how it is. And I’m definitely not going to ask for a pain shot.”

“No, you don’t want to do that,” he said. “But I’m definitely not going to bring you any bourbon either.”

“Why not?”

“They’ll smell it. I’ll bring you some vodka instead.”

“That’s what I like about you, Papa. Always thinking. Yeah, vodka would be great.”

“But I can’t bring it tonight.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve been knocking back a few myself. I’m really not in any shape to drive. I can stop by in the morning. Where are you?”

I told him the name of the hospital and the room number.

“What time do you think you’ll come?” I said.

“Eight or nine. Something like that.”

“It’s going to be a long night,” I said.

“Sorry. Best I can do.”

“All right. Well, I’ll be here. Thanks, Papa. I appreciate you.”

“Later, gator.”

“Bye.”

I hung up. A couple of minutes later, nurse Kim walked in with a cup of coffee.

“Cream and sugar?” she said.

“Black’s fine. Thanks.”

“I’d like to go over those questions with you now, if that’s all right.”

“You’re the boss,” I said.

There was a padded wooden chair by the window. Kim pulled it over to the bed and sat down facing me. She had a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other.

“Have you ever had any surgeries?” she said.

“My wife didn’t tell you about that?”

“She said you’d had some on your left hand, but she couldn’t remember how many.”

“Six. And I had abdominal surgery when I was twelve.”

“What kind of abdominal surgery?”

“It was a repair job. My stepfather stabbed me with a steak knife. They went ahead and took my appendix out while they were at it.”

“That’s horrible,” Kim said.

“Yeah. It was kind of rough.”

“Do you think that has anything to do with your recent psychiatric problems?”

“Maybe,” I said. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s certainly possible. I’ll make sure the doctor knows about it.”

“Great.”

“Okay, just a couple of more things. Do you use any recreational drugs?”

“Not anymore,” I said.

“Smoke cigarettes?”

“Not anymore.”

“Do you drink alcohol?”

“Yes.”

“What type?”

“Beer. Bourbon sometimes.”

“How often do you drink?” she said.

I was going to say *occasionally* or *just socially* or some other boldface lie, but before I had a chance, someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Kim said.

A woman wearing a black pants suit and a long white lab coat walked into the room. She had a backpack on one shoulder, and a stethoscope draped around her neck. She introduced herself as Dr. Lucy Bellwinger, from the psychiatric department.

But that wasn’t her real name.

I recognized her right away.

It was Diana Dawkins.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“We can finish this in a little while,” Kim said. “I’ll let you talk to the doctor right now.”

“All right.”

Kim got up and left the room. She took the clipboard with her.

Diana sat in the chair.

“Hello, Nicholas. How are you?”

“*Bellwinger?*” I said. “Is that the best you could come up with?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

She sat there with her legs crossed and her hands in her lap, trying to stay in character. Having a little fun with me. Messing with my head. But I knew better. I knew it was her, and I knew she was real. It raised my level of optimism a notch. At least I wasn’t totally unzipped.

“Knock it off, Diana. Boy, they really had me going for a while. I thought you were a hallucination. I guess Terry Vine was, but not you. You’re about as real as they come.”

“How do you know?” she said. “How do you know you’re not hallucinating right now?”

“The nurse saw you. She left the room when you came in.”

“How do you know you didn’t imagine that as well?”

“Give it a rest,” I said. “What do you want from me?”

“We have to get you out of here. Today’s the day. We have a lot of work to do.”

“Okay, so get me out of here. Your ID badge there says you’re a doctor, so just discharge me. Call Kim in here to get this IV out of my arm, and I’ll put my clothes on and be on my way.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy?”

“Why not?”

“Your attending physician would have to be the one to discharge you. Not a consult from the psych department. We’re going to have to sneak you out of here.”

“Why can’t I just walk out against medical advice or whatever? I’m not a prisoner, am I?”

“Actually, you are. They can hold you up to seventy-two hours for psychiatric evaluation. Didn’t your nurse explain that to you?”

“No.”

Diana got up and lifted the hinged plastic cover on the foot of the bed and pressed a button. There was a small electronic beep.

“Your bed alarm was on,” she said. “I turned it off.”

She started lowering the side rails.

“Will my nurse get in trouble if I escape?”

“Yes. They’re supposed to have someone in the room with you at all times.”

“So why don’t they?”

“They were probably short on staff, so they cheated and turned your alarm on instead. It happens. It’s not supposed to, but it does. Not our problem.”

Diana walked around to the left side of the bed and switched off the IV pump. She raised the bed and started working on getting the needle out of my arm.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” I said.

“It’s not rocket science, Nicholas.”

“Last time I ripped an IV out, it bled all over the place.”

“Don’t worry.”

She started picking at the edge of the surgical tape.

“Ouch!” I said. “Don’t I get a bullet to bite on or something?”

“Stop being such a baby.”

She peeled off the tape and the transparent dressing, along with half the hair on my arm. She gently dislodged the intravenous catheter, wiped the area with an alcohol swab, and then applied a bandage at the insertion site.

“What if I really do have an infection?” I said. “Maybe I need that medicine.”

“I’m afraid that’s a chance we’ll have to take.”

She opened her backpack and handed me a set of green surgical scrubs and a pair of slip-on shoes and a picture ID badge that said Ray Lipton, MD, General Surgery. I sat up and started getting dressed.

“So how do we get by the nurses’ station without anyone seeing us?” I said. “They’ll recognize my face.”

She looked at her watch. “Any minute now—”

Before she finished her thought, a female voice calmly announced that there was a code blue on the orthopedics unit on the fourth floor. She repeated it three times. *Code blue, four south orthopedics, initiate rapid response team...*

“That means someone’s dead or dying, right?” I said.

“That’s what it means. Come on, let’s go.”

We took a left out of the doorway and headed toward the elevator bank. I looked back and saw some staff members dragging a cart loaded with resuscitation equipment down the hall and into the last room on the left.

Max Marlin’s room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

We stood there and waited for an elevator. One finally opened, and a couple of doctors stepped out and gave us hard stares before trotting toward the commotion at the end of the hall. I held the door while Diana boarded, and then I followed her in. She pushed the button for the first floor.

“Perfect timing for a code blue,” I said. “Almost as if it was orchestrated.”

“It was.”

“You killed Max Marlin?”

“I had to. He’d seen the Perry Wendell Davis credentials in the briefcase.”

“You have the briefcase?” I said.

“I took it out of your Jimmy last night.”

“My Jimmy was locked.”

I realized how irrelevant that was as soon as the words left my mouth. Diana just shook her head and grinned.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I didn’t load your gun with blanks or anything this time.”

“How did you know Max saw what was in the briefcase?”

“His fingerprints were all over everything. The bonehead didn’t even think to use gloves. He had to undergo a criminal background check to get his PI license, so it was easy to trace the prints.”

“So how did you do it? How did you kill him?”

“I’ll tell you later if you’re really interested. It wasn’t hard.”

The doors parted and we got out on the first floor. We walked down a couple of long hallways, made a turn to the left and a turn to the right and exited into the parking garage. We took the stairs to the second level, and I followed Diana to her car. She was driving a black Lincoln Navigator. We climbed inside and she started the engine.

“Who else saw those things in the briefcase?” she said.

“Nobody. The case was in Max’s car when he wrecked it. I went to the auto repair place and got it out of the trunk. Nobody else saw it.”

“Did Max tell your wife about it?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Maybe he told her and she just didn’t say anything to you about it.”

“I don’t think so. I think he wrecked the car before he ever talked to her about it.”

I'd stressed the importance to Juliet of never mentioning the contents of that case, or any of the other things I'd spilled the beans about. I only hoped she took me seriously, especially now that she thought I was crazy. If it ever got out that Max had told her about Perry Wendell Davis, or that I had told her about The Circle, Diana would probably execute us both.

"Where are we going?" I said.

"To the safe house. I have some things I need to go over with you."

It was almost two in the morning by the time we made it to that squalid little concrete bungalow in the middle of nowhere. Diana parked the Navigator and we got out and walked inside. She switched some lights on and started a pot of coffee.

"Got anything stronger around here?" I said.

"Like what?"

"Like whiskey."

"I need you to have a clear head, Nicholas. We have an extremely long day ahead of us."

"Believe me, my head will be clearer if I have a drink or two."

"What are you, an alcoholic or something?"

"I'm not an alcoholic. I just need something to steady my nerves right now."

"There's beer in the fridge," she said. "That's all I have."

I opened the refrigerator door, found three bottles of beer on the bottom shelf. It wasn't going to be nearly enough, but it was better than nothing. I grabbed one and screwed the top off and chugged the entire thing. I grabbed another one and screwed the top off and sat at the table beside Diana. She plugged in her laptop and got it going, and then she opened a large manila envelope and pulled out some papers.

"They found the bug you planted," she said. "Fortunately, I got some good information before they did, and we've gotten some intelligence from other sources as well. The project manager, a man named Robert Swanson, and one of the engineers, a man named Gary Kramer, are the ones plotting to kill the president and frame me for the crime. I only overheard one brief conversation there at Aero-Fleck, but it was enough to get the ball rolling. Swanson and Kramer are passing classified information to a terrorist group we've been monitoring for a while. In addition to the assassination, this group is planning a series of cyber-attacks over the next several weeks that will completely cripple our infrastructure. There will be power outages, and municipal water supplies will run dry. No refrigeration, no fuel pumps, no working toilets, coast-to-coast. There will be looting and shooting and mass hysteria. It'll be like nothing the world has ever seen before. In the months that follow, they plan to stage an actual coup on Washington. When all is said and done, there won't be a

United States of America anymore. We'll be under the rule of an authoritarian regime."

"Why are they doing all this?" I said. "What's the motivation?"

"Hatred. That's it. They hate our way of life. They hate our president, and they hate us."

"I understand that about the terrorist group. But what about Swanson and Kramer. What's *their* motivation?"

"Money. Through treason, they have become very wealthy men. They don't care about what happens to our country. They have residences abroad, and they'll be able to fly out of here before the shit hits the fan. At least that's what they think. Actually, The Circle is taking care of them as we speak."

I had a pretty good idea of what *taking care of them* meant.

"I'm still not clear on why the terrorists want to frame you for the assassination," I said.

"The assassination is mostly a diversion. Think about it. The first presidential assassination since JFK, and the accused is a DOD employee. That's why they placed the coded schematics in the classified documents safe at Aero-Fleck, by the way, to use as evidence against me after the assassination. Of course they had no idea that a DOD inspector would ever be able to read the code. That's just what they wanted the authorities to think. Anyway, the trial, *my* trial, will be the focus of worldwide media attention for months. While everyone's paying attention to that, the terrorists will be quietly hacking away at the computers controlling our power grids. By the time we figure out what's going on, it will be too late. That's what the terrorists are counting on, and that's one of the reasons it's critical to stop them in their tracks. Without the diversion, they won't be nearly as likely to succeed with their other pursuits."

"So how are we going to stop all this from happening?" I said.

"We're not. Not alone. As soon as I knew it was Swanson and Kramer setting all this up—and not someone from my own organization—I was able to enlist some help. I have an entire group of operatives, experts in computer security, working to thwart the cyber-attack. But I'm still going to need your help to stop the assassination."

"Why me?" I said. "It seems like The Circle's fulltime operatives would be the ones to handle such a crucial mission."

"Don't sell yourself short, Nicholas. You were chosen as a recruit for The Circle because of your keen insights as a detective and your dogged determination and loyalty. Those traits are hard to come by. I have an important assignment for you, but it's nothing you can't handle. In fact, you probably won't have to do much of anything. We have everything covered except for one very, very unlikely motorcade route. That's what I'm going to show you now."

"I know I mentioned this before," I said. "But given the gravity of the situation, it seems like the best course of action for the president would be to stay home. Or maybe even go to his secret bunker and ride it out from there."

"That would be one way to approach the problem," Diana said. "But it would be the wrong way. We can't let the president know about any of this. If he knows, his advisors will know. Eventually, the FBI and the CIA and the Secret Service and Homeland Security will know, along with all the president's cabinet members. Once the word gets around the campfire, there will be a leak to the media. There always is. If there's a leak to the media, everyone in the country will know how close we came to a total collapse. They'll see how relatively simple it is to bring the entire country to its knees, and they'll lose any faith they might have once had in our government. Just the realization of what *could* have happened will cause mass panic, and the terrorists will have won indirectly. Do you remember how fearful everyone was after nine-eleven? It'll be like that, only multiplied exponentially. So no, the president can't just stay home."

She thumbed through the papers and pulled out a map of north Florida. Three routes from Gainesville to Jacksonville were highlighted, one in yellow, one in green, and one in red.

"So you don't know which route the president will be taking?" I said.

"No. The director of the Secret Service will make the decision sometime this morning, and then relay that information to the four supervisors covering the presidential detail. So, only five people on the planet will know the route ahead of time."

"They won't tell the president?"

"No. The president and the regular Secret Service agents won't know until a few minutes before the motorcade leaves the University of Florida campus. There's no way for us to obtain the information in time, so we'll have to cover all the routes. You'll be monitoring the one highlighted in green. Of the three routes highlighted, it's the least likely to be taken. So, with a little luck, you won't have to do anything."

"How do the terrorists know which route they'll be taking?" I said.

"We suspect they have a man inside, one of the Secret Service supervisors. It's the only way they could know, unless the director himself is a traitor. I doubt that, but it's possible. We'll be putting the screws to everyone involved once this is over, but right now our primary objective is to take out the terrorists before they take out the president."

"Okay. So what do you want me to do?"

"This is where you're going to earn that big paycheck," she said.

“Go ahead and get your last beer out of the refrigerator and have a seat. This is going to take a while.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Diana spent the next four hours outlining, in excruciating detail, my part of the operation. By the time she finished, the sun had come up and the beer was long gone and we were on our third pot of coffee.

I was exhausted.

“Let’s go over the basics one more time,” she said.

“I need to sleep. At least an hour. My brain is fried.”

“One more time, and then I’ll let you take a nap.”

I sighed. “All right.”

She opened her laptop and navigated to some photographs of a residential neighborhood.

“This is the address you’ll be going to,” she said. “The backyard is on a slope, and it overlooks a stretch of woods adjacent to the highway here.” She pointed to a spot on the paper map. “This is the only spot on the green route where the terrorists could be hidden well enough *and* have a clear shot at the president’s limousine. And it’s the only spot where they’ll have a reliable way to escape unseen once the deed is done. We were pretty sure this would be their location if they choose this route, and last night we confirmed it. They’ve hidden a weapon there, and they’ve hidden two more weapons at strategic locations along the yellow and red routes.”

“What kind of weapons?”

“That’s where they were pretty clever. They’re using Hotchkiss thirty-seven millimeter revolving cannons. They’re antiques, so they were a lot easier to acquire and transport than any sort of modern military weaponry. They use a hand crank, like a Gatling gun. The projectiles leave holes the size of silver dollars, and they can shoot up to forty rounds a minute. That was key, because it’s going to take several rounds fired at precisely the same spot to penetrate the six-inch window glass on the limo.”

“Is that even possible with the car moving?” I said.

“No. Their plan must involve stopping the motorcade somehow. But we’re not going to let it get that far.”

“Since they already have weapons in place, why don’t they just go ahead and post men along all the routes?”

“Because they don’t have to. They have someone inside telling them which route will be used. Posting men at all three routes would triple the chances of getting caught.”

“I guess that makes sense,” I said.

“The address you’ll be going to is a private residence, but the owner won’t be home. One thing I might not have stressed before is the

narrow window we have between the time the homeowner leaves and the time the president's motorcade will travel by. It's only about fifteen minutes, so you'll have to watch the residence closely. When the owner leaves, you'll need to get in and get set up as quickly as possible."

"And I'll be shooting from a bedroom window?"

"Yes, the bedroom on the north end of the house, in back, the window closest to the patio door. You won't be able to see the president's motorcade from there, but you'll be able to see the terrorist gunmen on the wooded slope that leads to the highway. There should be two of them, three at the most."

"All right."

"And what else is important about that window?" she said, quizzing me on what she'd gone over before.

"I need to break it before I go into the house," I said. "So the glass will fall inside. To make it look like a burglary. While I'm in there, I'll pull drawers out and mess things up, to make it appear as though a thief had been searching for cash and jewelry and whatnot. If I find anything of value that's easy to carry out, I'll take it."

"Right. But you won't actually be *breaking* the window at first. In a little while, I'll show you exactly how you're going to gain entry. I'll let you practice with some tools on one of the windows here."

"And you're sure there aren't any alarms or dogs or anything else that might trip me up? I would hate to be arrested for breaking and entering while the president's being riddled with a machinegun."

"No dogs, no alarms. I'm sure."

"What if the homeowner doesn't leave?"

"The homeowner is definitely going to leave. She has a regular Friday appointment that she never misses, and she already has a confirmed time for county transportation to pick her up."

"Shit happens," I said. "What if the van is involved in an accident or something? What if she gets food poisoning, or has a headache, or for some other reason just doesn't feel like going to her appointment today? I can't just knock on her door and ask to use her bedroom to pick off some terrorists, can I?"

"No, you obviously can't do that. But you're smart to bring up these contingencies. It means you're thinking analytically, and that's the way I need you to think. I've been waiting four hours for you to ask about that."

"Well? What if she doesn't leave?"

"If she's not out of the house by two-fifteen, you're going to have to eliminate her," Diana said. "It's essential that we position you inside that house."

I got up and poured myself a cup of coffee. My fingers were

trembling from too much caffeine and too little alcohol. I was tired and wired and I felt like telling Diana Dawkins to take her three hundred thousand dollars and stick it up her ass.

“That’s insane,” I said. “You said yourself that the motorcade probably won’t take the green route. A hundred to one odds, you said. It’s the longest route, and the most isolated, and the one with the most potholes and other road damage. So, on that one chance in a hundred, I’m going to kill an innocent civilian so I can stand at her bedroom window and more than likely watch nothing happen?”

“You’re not going to have to kill her, Nicholas, because she *will* leave the house to go to her appointment. I’m ninety-nine point nine percent sure of that.”

“I hope so,” I said. “Because I don’t know if I could do it.”

“You were prepared to kill Terry Vine, weren’t you?”

“Yeah. But maybe it was because somewhere deep in my subconscious I knew he wasn’t real.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to know what is real and what isn’t,” Diana said. “This might all be a dream, and you might still be in your bed at the hospital.”

I thought about that. I needed a drink, but most of all I needed sleep. Diana finally let me go back to one of the bedrooms and take a nap. Unfortunately, when she woke me up two hours later, I was still in the same place.

I wasn’t back in my bed at the hospital.

This wasn’t a dream.

I was still at the safe house, and for some reason I just didn’t feel very safe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Diana dropped me off half a mile from the residence I was supposed to invade. I walked along the shoulder of the highway carrying a backpack and a guitar case. I wore black fatigue pants and a black T-shirt, and a pair of flight deck boots that Diana had picked up from a military surplus store. I was supposed to look like an itinerant musician. There were a variety of tools and weapons in the backpack, everything from a walkie-talkie to a pair of high-powered field glasses.

The interior of the guitar case had been remodeled to fit a crossbow with a scope. There was a laser pointer and a stabilizer and six 31-inch carbon arrows with razor sharp tips. I'd been in the archery club in high school, so I knew how to shoot a compound bow, but I'd never messed with a crossbow. Diana had given me a crash course on how to use it, and I'd taken some target practice before we packed off on our mission.

When I made it to the turnoff that led to the house, I hiked fifty feet or so beyond the tree line to stay out of sight. I stayed parallel to the road until I spotted the mailbox with the right numbers on it, and then I set my things down and waited. It was 2:06. If the presidential motorcade took this route, it would pass the terrorist's setup at approximately 2:34. One way or another, this would all be over in twenty-eight minutes.

I pulled out the walkie-talkie and dialed in the frequency Diana and I had agreed on. I clipped the unit onto my belt and attached the headset to my left ear. My code name for this operation was Bullfrog, and Diana's was Wild Canary. Diana had refreshed my memory on proper radio voice procedure, and she stressed that for security reasons we should keep our conversations as brief as possible.

"Wild Canary, this is Bullfrog requesting a radio check. Over."

"Bullfrog, this is Wild Canary. You are five by nine. Over."

"Wild Canary, this is Bullfrog. Roger that. Over and out."

Five by nine was good. It meant she was reading me loud and clear, with an extremely strong signal. We probably wouldn't need to communicate much by radio, but it was nice to know we had a good signal if we needed it.

2:11.

Still no sign of the homeowner. She had exactly four minutes to get out of there, or I was going to have to go in. If I went in, I would have to eliminate her. *Collateral damage*, Diana had called it. Sometimes it was essential to sacrifice the one in order to save the many. That's the way it always worked in war, she'd said.

And we were at war.

It made sense, unless of course you were the one being sacrificed. Then it sucked.

I didn't want to kill this lady. I didn't even know her name. Diana had shown me a photograph, but that was it. No personal history. The only thing I knew about this woman was her address. Diana had said it was best not to know the names of potential targets, because giving them a name made them more human. The less intimacy the better, she'd said. It's much easier to shoot at a *thing* than a living breathing person.

I didn't know the names of the terrorists I might have to shoot either, but at least I had a good reason to take them out. The homeowner, not so much.

2:14.

I was about to call Diana on the radio and ask if there was any possible way to avoid murdering this poor woman when I heard the hum of tires on pavement. The county transportation van turned into the driveway. Less than a minute later, it backed out to the road with the passenger buckled securely in the backseat.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Once the van was out of sight, I crossed the road and trotted up the driveway and walked around to the backyard. I looked down the hill. There was a row of crape myrtles along the far edge of the property, and beyond that a thick stand of pine trees. Everything looked the way it should have looked. No apparent threat, but Diana had said that I might not see any signs of the enemy until seconds before the motorcade rolled by. So it was possible that the terrorists were somewhere in the vicinity, even though I couldn't see them from my current position.

The rear of the house faced north. There were two double windows on the right and a single window on the left and a glass patio door in the middle. I was interested in the single window on the left. That was the one Diana had instructed me to break into. It was the position I would be shooting my arrows from, if need be.

At first, it had seemed to me that a sniper rifle would make more sense in this situation, but Diana said no. The report would be too loud. The president's limousine would speed away surrounded by police escorts, and in a matter of seconds a team of Secret Service agents would be all over the woods and the surrounding area. They would find the Hotchkiss 37mm and the dead terrorists, and then they would find me. We didn't want any of that to happen, Diana said. It was crucial that nobody outside The Circle discovered anything about the assassination attempt. If anyone did, it would be nearly as harmful to the nation as the terrorists succeeding. It was a case of need-to-know, and nobody outside The Circle needed to.

My earpiece squawked.

“Bullfrog, this is Wild Canary. Are you inside? Over.”

“Wild Canary, this is Bullfrog. Negative. The homeowner left just a couple of minutes ago. Over.”

“You need to hurry. You’re behind schedule, and Silver Stallion is headed that way. I repeat: Silver Stallion is headed that way. Over.”

Silver Stallion was the code word for the President of the United States of America.

He was headed my way.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

A surge of anxiety washed over me, a red hot bolus of adrenaline-soaked fear. My heart rate and respirations went from simmer to a rolling boil.

“Roger that,” I said, trying to at least keep my voice calm. “I’m at the window now. Will be inside ASAP. Over.”

“Just hurry up. Over and out.”

I reached into the backpack and pulled out a roll of duct tape, a utility knife, a glass cutter, and a small mallet with a pointed rubber hub on one end and a flat steel hammerhead on the other. It would have been quicker to just smash the window and climb inside, but I needed to get in as quietly as possible. There weren’t any neighbors nearby, but if the terrorists had already trekked into the woods, the sound of breaking glass might alert them to my presence.

I definitely didn’t want that. Diana had said that along with the antique Hotchkiss, they would be armed with some very modern assault rifles, fully automatic, and they wouldn’t hesitate to mow down anyone who got in their way.

I cut the screen with the utility knife, and then promptly went to work on the glazing. I reached into the backpack and pulled out a ten-inch bar with suction cups on each end. I attached the bar to the center of the window, to be used as a handle. Once that was secure, I scored an area around the perimeter of the glazing with the glass cutter. I picked up the mallet and tapped the scored area with my right hand while holding the ten-inch bar with my left. I had to do it twice all the way around, but then the center of the window popped out cleanly like a piece from a jigsaw puzzle.

I lowered the loose piece of glass to the carpet inside. I had made some noise tapping the glazing with the rubber end of the mallet, but not much. Not enough to carry into the woods, I hoped.

There was a five gallon bucket on the patio beside the barbecue grill. I walked over and grabbed it and took it to the window, turned it upside down and used it for a step. I shoved the guitar case and the backpack in first, and then eased myself through the opening one leg at a time.

I glanced around the room, assessing my surroundings. There was a full-size bed and a dresser with a mirror and a chest of drawers. There was a basket of laundry on the bed, waiting to be folded and put away. No pictures on the wall, no figurines or perfume bottles or any other dust collectors on any of the surfaces. Either the homeowner was a minimalist, or she'd moved in recently and hadn't had a chance to unpack those kinds of things yet. Or maybe she just had an aversion to clutter. I could relate.

The only thing that might have qualified as a decoration was a wooden hat tree with a dozen or so purses hanging from it. It was a nice collection, some of the handbags old and worn and some in mint condition. One of them looked like something Jacqueline Kennedy might have carried.

2:25.

If Diana's estimate was correct, the president's motorcade would start to pass through in nine minutes. I needed to focus, and I needed to work fast.

But first I needed something to calm my frayed nerves.

I walked out of the bedroom and found my way to the kitchen, moving quickly and taking in the layout of the house. It was an open floor plan, with the living room clearly visible from the food prep area and the dining area. I looked in the pantry. Among the boxes of cereal and saltines and the cans of tuna and spaghetti sauce, there was a bottle of very cheap dry vermouth. The homeowner probably used it for cooking. Or maybe martinis. That was a thought. But if the homeowner used it for martinis, it seemed the vodka or gin would be there beside it.

As much as my body craved alcohol, I shuddered at the thought of actually pouring the vermouth into a glass and drinking it. Maybe there was something else. I started opening cabinets and drawers, finding nothing but pots and pans and tumblers and plates and coffee mugs and silverware. Then, in the little cupboard above the stove, there it was. A 750ml bottle of vodka, unopened, a very expensive brand.

Maybe it had been a Christmas gift or something. Maybe the woman who lived there was saving it for a special occasion. I didn't know. I couldn't fathom why she would bother to have something like that in her house and then not drink it. Maybe she'd finished one bottle yesterday and would start on this one today. I didn't know. I didn't care. I cracked the seal and poured some into a coffee cup and headed back to the bedroom.

I'd taken two steps toward my destination when a voice from behind me said, "What are you doing, Mr. Colt?"

I turned. There in the kitchen, by the door to the garage, stood

Terry Vine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I took a sip of vodka. Not a sip. More like a gulp. Terry stood there leaning against the wall with his arms folded across his chest. He had a toothpick in his mouth.

“Go away,” I said. “You’re not real.”

“I’m as real as you are, Mr. Colt. What are you doing in my house?”

“It’s not your house. A woman lives here.”

“She’s Darrel’s cousin,” he said. “I told you we were staying with his cousin.”

It was a lie. Terry Vine wasn’t real, and his stepfather wasn’t real, and his stepfather’s cousin wasn’t real. I kept trying to convince myself of those things as I continued the conversation.

“This isn’t the address you gave me,” I said.

“Sorry about that.”

“And why did you tell me you had the briefcase when you didn’t?”

“Sorry about that too. I was just messing with you. What can I say? I have a little bit of a mischievous streak. But I guess you’ve probably figured that out by now.”

“You’re not real, Terry. Anyway, even if you *are* real, you’re still in California.”

“I had to come home early, but my dad’s still trying to get it worked out so I can move out there permanently.”

“Where’s Darrel?” I said.

“Believe it or not, he’s out looking for a job. About time, don’t you think?”

The seconds were ticking away, and there I was, standing around having a conversation with a hallucination.

2:29.

“I have to go now,” I said. “Excuse me while I try to save the world.”

I turned and headed back to the bedroom, drinking more of the vodka as I went. I didn’t look back. I didn’t want to know if Terry was following me or not.

I set the cup on the dresser, knelt down and pulled out the crossbow. It was already cocked, the only way it could have possibly fit into a regular-size acoustic guitar case. It was black and ominous. It looked like a big lethal pretzel. I liberated four of the arrows from their slots and scooted over to the window. I pulled out the field glasses, looked down the hill and adjusted the focus. I was about to call Diana and tell her there was still no sign of the terrorists when I saw something slightly blurry by one of the pine trees. The more I

focused on it, the more I could see the outline of a human being. A transparent person.

It was the freakiest thing I'd ever seen.

"Wild Canary, this is Bullfrog. Do you copy? Over."

"Bullfrog, this is Wild Canary. Affirmative. Over."

"I currently have one target—wait there's another one. I currently have two targets in my sights, but they're practically invisible. They look like walking slabs of clear gelatin or something. Over."

"Optic camouflage," she said. "They're wearing suits imbedded with hundreds of tiny video cameras and hundreds of tiny monitors. What you're seeing is a digital playback, in real time, of whatever's directly on the other side of them. It's an amazing technology, something I wasn't aware they had. Can you see them well enough to take a shot? Over."

"I think so. Over."

"What about the Hotchkiss? Have they uncovered the cannon yet? Over."

"Negative. Wait, they're doing it now. It was under some fallen pine branches and some other organic debris. Over."

Even with those things cleared away, the cannon was still very hard to see. Someone had plastered a bunch of stuff onto it. Twigs and leaves and pine needles and clumps of dirt covered the barrel and wheels and crank and feeding chute, rendering the apparatus practically indistinguishable from its surroundings. It blended in almost as well as the men with their high-tech outfits.

"I just got word that the motorcade is approaching," Diana said. "You need to eliminate the targets immediately. Over."

"Roger that. Over and out."

I knelt on one knee and grabbed an arrow and steadied the bow against the windowsill. The targets were about fifty yards away. Half the length of a football field. I peered through the scope and lowered the crosshairs on the invisible man on the left. I decided to name him Invisible Terrorist Asshole Number One. He was loading shells into the feeding rack on that side of the cannon. The other guy, Invisible Terrorist Asshole Number Two, had his hand on the crank, ready to start firing.

2:33.

"That's a cool crossbow, Mr. Colt."

It was Terry again. I didn't turn around. I kept my eye on the target.

"Get out of here," I said.

"Is that any way to talk to your favorite student? I've been practicing, by the way. I think I have that lead part down pat. I'm sure I'll have it by next Thursday."

"Terrific."

"What are you aiming at?" he said.

"A target. That's what I'm trying to con myself into believing, anyway. But that's not the truth. I'm aiming at a human being, Terry. In a few seconds, I'm going to take his life. Then I'm going to take his buddy's life. They're not targets. They're real men. Flesh and blood. They have people who love them. Parents and siblings and cousins and aunts and uncles. They have friends. Maybe they're married, with kids of their own. In a few seconds, their world is going to come to an end, and I'm going to be the one responsible for making it happen."

"Cool."

"Not really," I said.

"Then why are you doing it?"

"Because they're very bad men. If I don't kill them, they're going to try to kill the president."

"*The* president?"

"Yeah."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"Good point."

I held my breath and pulled the trigger and let the arrow fly. It whizzed through the air and found its mark directly between Invisible Terrorist Asshole Number One's shoulder blades.

I grabbed the binoculars. The arrow's steel tip must have shorted out his camo suit. I could see him clearly now. He turned slightly, and I saw that the shaft of the arrow had gone all the way through his body. The feather part was sticking out of his back, and the arrowhead part was sticking out of the center of his chest. It was a good shot. It had pierced his heart. He stood there for a second, looking stunned, and then fell forward.

Invisible Terrorist Asshole Number Two ran to that side of the cannon and knelt down beside his fallen comrade. His suit wasn't working properly either. He would appear for a second, and then become invisible again. He kept fading in and out. Seeing what had happened, he started looking around frantically. At the same time, he pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and punched in some numbers. I cocked the bow and grabbed another arrow and drew a bead on him.

"Bullfrog, this is Wild Canary," Diana said over the radio. "The motorcade is starting to pass by now. The limo will be in the line of fire in approximately thirty seconds. Has the problem been resolved? Over."

"Half of it has," I said. "Preparing to take care of the other half now. Over."

"Do it. Over and out."

Invisible Terrorist Asshole Number Two looked up the hill. Naked eyes, no field glasses. It was possible he saw me now, although I was

pretty sure the crape myrtles blocked his view. At least partially.

The terrorists obviously hadn't worried much about being seen from the residence. If the assassination had gone as planned, the Hotchkiss 37mm cannon would have only been exposed for a couple of minutes. Not likely the homeowner would have been looking down the hill at that time. And, even if she had, the cannon was impossible to see without some sort of magnification. And with those optic camouflage suits, the assassins had cloaking capabilities that belonged in a science fiction movie. Only someone specifically looking for them, like me, was going to see them. And maybe, like me, they had intelligence that the homeowner was going to be gone while the motorcade passed anyway. They certainly had never expected someone with field glasses and a crossbow to be on top of the hill firing arrows at them.

Invisible Terrorist Asshole Number Two went for his assault rifle.

He aimed it up the hill. He still had time to shoot me, and then nail the limousine with the cannon. For a brief moment, success was still within his reach.

But before he got a single shot off, my arrow whistled through the atmosphere at three hundred feet per second and drilled its way into the left side of his throat. He dropped the rifle and clutched the carbon shaft, trying to dislodge it.

I wondered what went through a person's mind in a situation like that. Did he think he stood a chance of surviving? Did he think it was just a matter of pulling that dreadful and excruciatingly painful foreign object out of his neck?

I wondered.

He managed to break the arrow in half, but that just hastened things. Blood started flowing from the hollow shaft like water from a faucet. He staggered around for a few seconds, and he actually got one hand on the cannon crank before collapsing to the ground. His legs convulsed a couple of times, and then it was over.

"You got him!" Terry said.

"Yeah. I think this calls for a celebration."

I got up and walked over to the dresser and drained the rest of the vodka from the coffee cup.

I took a deep breath, let it out slowly through pursed lips.

"I'll be in the garage practicing if you need me," Terry said, nonchalantly. "I'll have my headphones on, so just kick me or throw something at me or something if you want to get my attention."

I nodded, happy to be rid of my imaginary friend for a while.

I called Diana on the radio.

"Wild Canary, this is Bullfrog. The threat has been eliminated. Over."

"Brilliant," she said. "The motorcade is passing by now, so we're

almost in the clear. In less than a minute, the president will be completely out of harm's way. Over."

"Should I proceed as planned? Over."

"Affirmative. Excellent job, Bullfrog. A clean-up crew will be there in thirty minutes to get rid of the Hotchkiss cannon and the bodies and any other evidence. Over and out."

I went back to the window and put the crossbow and the remaining arrows back into the modified guitar case.

Then I went to work on the room.

I scooted the piece of glass back under the window and smashed it with the metal end of the mallet, and then I chipped away at the glazing still in the window frame. When I finished, there were jagged edges all the way around, as though a common burglar had invaded the home and not a professional thief. That's what we wanted the cops to think, that an everyday scumbag had busted in for a quick look around.

I started pulling out drawers and tossing socks and panties and bras and Tshirts and other miscellaneous items haphazardly around the room, like someone looking to score some cash or jewelry or maybe even a bag of weed.

Or maybe even a gun.

In one of the junk drawers, under some CDs and old greeting cards, there was a Smith and Wesson .357 magnum, very much like the one I kept strapped under our bed frame at home. Very much like it. In fact, it could have been my revolver's twin. Same make and model, same Nickel plating, same hardwood grips.

I checked to see if it was loaded.

It was.

The .357 was a valuable gun. No thief worth his salt would have left it. I stuffed it into my backpack, and then I continued flinging things out of drawers until I'd gone through all of them. Near the end I found a hundred and three dollars rolled up in a sock. Nothing else of value. No diamond necklaces or Rolexes or anything. It would have been a rather disappointing day for a burglar, except for the .357.

I'd almost finished ransacking the place when Diana came back over the radio.

"Bullfrog, this is Wild Canary. We have a situation. There's been a snag. The presidential motorcade has come to a complete stop there on the highway behind the house. The word I'm getting is that there's a mechanical problem with the president's limo. Probably arranged by the terrorists' inside man. A dozen Secret Service agents are out of the cars and on the street, armed and ready, physically guarding a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree perimeter around the president's car. They're standing by for now, but eventually they're going to move the

president to another vehicle, which means he'll be somewhat vulnerable for ten seconds or so. I'm sure everything will be all right now that you've eliminated the threat, but could you keep an eye out just in case? Over."

"Affirmative, Wild Canary. Will do. This is Bullfrog, over and out."

I walked back to the window and grabbed the binoculars and looked down the hill.

That's when I saw Invisible Terrorist Asshole Number Three.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

He moved around with vague blurry borders, the way the other two had done while their optic camo suits were working. Number Three had probably been posted somewhere as a lookout, and then had come running when Number Two made the call on his cell phone. That was my guess. He appeared to be unarmed.

He checked one fallen man, and then the other, but there was nothing he could do for them. He stood with his back to me with his hands on his hips, looking farther down the hill. Thinking. Asking himself what went wrong. He stood there like that for a few seconds and then turned and started looking in all directions, probably wondering if the deadly force that had snuffed out his friends was still lurking nearby. Seeing the arrows, he might have thought hunters had taken the guys out. I couldn't read his mind, but his movements seemed to denote confusion over what to do next.

"Wild Canary, this is Bullfrog. We have another one. Over."

"Say again? Over."

"There's a third terrorist down by the cannon," I said. "So far, he looks baffled, like he doesn't know what to do. Over."

"You're sure it's one of them? Over."

"Affirmative. He's wearing one of those optic camouflage suits, like the other guys. Over."

"Then what are you waiting for?" she said. "Kill him. Over."

"Roger that. Over and out."

I opened the guitar case and pulled out the crossbow, along with two arrows. I couldn't kneel down at the window this time, because of the broken glass everywhere. It would have cut my knee to shreds. I thought about grabbing the quilt off the bed and throwing it on top of the shards and slivers, but then the police would wonder why there was glass on the quilt. I tried standing back a few feet, but I couldn't find the proper angle to get a shot off.

Invisible Terrorist Asshole Number Three was fiddling with the cannon now, trying to figure out how it worked. Maybe he was new to the outfit. Maybe that's why they had used him for a lookout.

He reached into a pocket and produced a cell phone and started stabbing at it with his thumbs. He was sending someone a text message, probably trying to get instructions on how to finish what Number One and Number Two had started. On how to blast the president's limo with a projectile that could penetrate the hull of a battleship.

I had to take him out before that happened.

From his position, the hill sloped off steeper on down to the highway. He could see the presidential motorcade, whereas I could not. The Secret Service agents wouldn't be able to see him because of the optic camo suit, and they wouldn't be able to see the cannon because of the natural foliage tacked to it, so right now the president was pretty much a sitting duck.

There was only one thing for me to do. I had to get to a higher position. I had to get up on the roof somehow and take my shot from there. I figured it would be quicker to do that than to try to clean up all the shards of glass in front of the window. And, if I did pick up the glass or scoot it out of the way, there would be no way of getting it back like it was. There would be bits of glass everywhere, and the cops would know the job had been staged.

I opened the front door and looked left and right, scouting for the best place to climb onto the roof, and then I ran back to the kitchen and opened the door to the garage.

Terry was sitting on a stool playing his guitar.

His eyes were closed.

"Is there a ladder in here?" I said.

He couldn't hear me with the headphones on, but it didn't matter. He wasn't real, so he couldn't actually do anything for me anyway. But that was okay. I didn't need his help. An aluminum extension ladder was mounted to the wall behind him, right there in plain sight. I walked over and grabbed it, flipped the switch to open the garage door and headed outside.

I fully extended the ladder and propped it against the roof on the front of the house and started climbing. When I made it to the top, I unloaded the crossbow and the arrows onto the composite shingles and pulled myself up. The field glasses were on a strap around my neck, and they got hung on the top of the ladder as I mounted the roof. I stumbled and came close to falling fifteen feet to the ground. I got lucky. I probably would have broken a leg, or maybe even a neck. I grabbed the weapon and climbed to the peak and scooted down to a vent pipe on the other side. I stood, hooking one foot around the pipe for stability, and peered down into the valley through the scope.

Number Three was still texting. His back was to me. I aimed and fired.

And missed.

The arrow punched into a tree a couple of feet to the villain's left. He put his cell phone away and looked up the hill.

It was a good thing I'd brought an extra arrow.

It was a bad thing I was down to one last chance at taking this guy out.

One last chance, and now I needed to cock the crossbow again,

which was the equivalent of dead-lifting a hundred and seventy-five pounds. Not an easy task under normal circumstances, and nearly impossible on a steep incline. The crossbow had a hand-actuated winch on the stock, but it took a couple of minutes to cock it that way. I didn't think I could afford the time.

I sat down and put my foot in the stirrup and tugged with all my might, but it was no use. I didn't have the strength to cock the bow at that angle, and there was no way for me to stand and do it on the pitched roof. I started cranking furiously on the winch, thinking bullets were going to start whizzing my way any second. I cranked and cranked and cranked, sweat dripping into my eyes and the muscles in my arm on fire.

Finally, the bowstring locked into place.

Nearly exhausted, I loaded my last arrow and took a quick peek down the hill with the binoculars. Number Three had picked up one of the assault rifles and was running toward the house.

My muscles trembled with fatigue as I aimed the bow and tracked the moving target with the crosshairs and gambled my life with one final shot.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Number Three was about twenty feet from the line of crape myrtles when the arrow thudded home just below his right shoulder. This time the optic camouflage suit continued to work. The feather end of the arrow seemed to be floating in midair as the terrorist arched and writhed and finally fell to the ground.

I fought a wave of nausea. I tossed the bow aside and collapsed onto my back, literally unable to support my own weight for another second.

I called Diana on the radio.

"Wild Canary, this is Bullfrog. Mission accomplished. Over."

"Are you all right? Over."

"I don't think so. I feel like shit. I'm tired. Over."

"Hang in there," she said. "It's almost over. Over."

"Yeah, almost. Over."

"I hear birds chirping," she said. "Are you outside? Over."

"I'm on the roof. I'll tell you about it later. Over."

"The president has been moved to a different vehicle, and the motorcade—with the addition of a police tow truck now—is proceeding along the route as planned. Congratulations, Bullfrog. Your first assignment was a huge success. Over."

"Thanks. If I can muster the strength, I'm going to gather my things now and get out of here. Over."

"Roger that. Make it quick, because the homeowner should be back from her appointment soon. I'll pick you up on the road where I dropped you off. When you see my car coming, stick your thumb out and act like you're hitchhiking. I want you to stay in character until we get back to the safe house. Don't forget to put the walkie-talkie away and take the headset off. See you in about fifteen minutes. Over and out."

I tossed the crossbow to the grass, and I took care with the dangling binoculars this time as I stepped onto the second rung below the roof's overhang and climbed down. I carried the ladder to the garage and hung it back on the wall where I'd found it and then closed the garage door. Terry was still shredding away on the guitar, lost in his own little world of music. He never even looked up.

I retrieved the crossbow and walked back into the house through the front door. I trotted back to the bedroom where my things were, loaded the crossbow into the guitar case and the field glasses and walkie-talkie apparatus into the backpack. I looked around to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. The room was a mess. The

homeowner was going to be pissed, and probably frightened, but I figured saving the world was worth it. Anyway, her insurance would take care of everything, and maybe now she would get an alarm system.

To my amazement, a spider had already started spinning a web across the broken window. It was a big brown one with long spindly legs. Spiders have always fascinated me. I like them. I stood there and gazed at the meticulous construction job, wondering how anything so awesome could have possibly evolved by accident.

I'm not sure how long I stood there oblivious to my surroundings. Just a few seconds, probably, but that momentary lapse in concentration turned out to be something I would regret for the rest of my life.

In the movies, bullets slam into people like sledgehammers and knock them around, but that's not what happens in real life. In real life, the shooter gets more of an impact from the recoil of the gun than the victim gets from the bullet. It's physics. I looked it up one time. Also, most people assume that getting shot is extremely painful, but that's not always the case. Not at first, anyway. Sometimes it's painful, and sometimes it's not.

This time it was not.

The blast came from behind, violently jarring me out of my trance. My breath caught and my heart pounded, but I didn't realize the full gravity of the situation until a split second later when I saw the blood splatters on the wall. I looked down at the wound, and for some reason all I could think about was that first phone call two weeks ago.

I never should have answered the call.

I turned away from the window and faced the doorway to the bedroom. A man stood there holding a semi-automatic pistol, the one he'd shot me in the back with. I guessed him to be about five-eight. He wore jeans and a T-shirt and a hateful snarl. Crewcut. Full-sleeve tats on both arms.

"Who are you?" I said.

"I was about to ask you the same thing. Come on into the living room where we can talk. Keep your hands where I can see them."

"You shot me. I need a doctor."

"I'm going to shoot you again if you don't do what I say."

The .357 was in my backpack, only inches away, but it might as well have been in another zip code. If I tried to go for it, this guy would unload on me.

"All right," I said. "You win."

He backed out of the doorway, holding the gun on me as I followed. When we got to the living room, he motioned for me to sit on the couch. He pulled an ottoman to the other side of the coffee table and

sat across from me.

"Where's Jet?" he said.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You her new boyfriend?"

Was this guy stupid, or what? Surely he'd seen the shape the bedroom was in. It should have been obvious to him that there'd been a home invasion, and that I was the burglar.

"I'm not anyone's new boyfriend," I said. "And I don't know anyone named Jet."

"You're lying. I made it to the edge of the woods a few minutes ago, and I saw you walk in through the front door. So I know you're not the thief who broke in here. You probably just now got home. You got a big surprise when you saw the broken window and the room all messed up, didn't you? Almost as big a surprise as when I shot you."

The bullet had entered the lower right side of my back, just below the kidney, and had exited through my abdomen, about three inches to the right of my belly button. I grabbed a couple of throw pillows from the couch and held pressure on the holes, using my left hand for the front and my right hand for the back. A steady stream of blood oozed from both sites.

"If I just now got home, where's my car?" I said.

"Maybe you don't have one. How am I supposed to know? I just know for a fact you ain't no burglar. Guys your age don't do this kind of penny ante shit. Unless you're a meth addict or something, and I can tell by looking at you that you're not. When I first got to the edge of the woods, you were heading in the front door with your crossbow. What kind of burglar walks around with a crossbow? No, you were out in the woods hunting or shooting at targets or something. I've been around criminals all my life, mister, and you ain't no burglar. Who do you think you're dealing with here?"

"I needed cash," I said. "I broke the window and climbed in. I promise, I've never heard of anyone named Jet."

"You broke the window and climbed in and then had a cocktail, is that it? I saw the bottle of vodka on the counter. In fact, I'm the one who *bought* that bottle. And in fact, I think I'm going to have myself a little right now while we wait for Jet to get home."

"I'm bleeding. I might be dead by the time she gets home."

"Oh, well. That's what you get."

"I need an ambulance. Please. If I die, you're going to be facing murder charges."

"Hey, I'll just tell the cops I thought you were a burglar. Good idea! I'll tell them I was stopping by to visit with Jet, and I happened upon what I thought was a home invasion. How perfect is that? Jet's new boyfriend—you—will be dead, and I'll be in the clear. They probably

won't even bust me for violating the restraining order. I couldn't have scripted it any better myself."

He got up and backed into the kitchen, holding the gun on me the entire time. He grabbed the vodka and uncapped it and took a swig as he returned to the living room. Once again, he perched across from me on the ottoman.

I was about to pass out from the pain. It felt as though someone had skewered me with a red hot fireplace poker. Dozens of psychedelic motes danced in front of my eyes as I struggled to maintain consciousness.

"I know you're not going to just sit there and watch me die," I said.

He sucked on the vodka bottle, wiped his mouth with his hand.

"Where's Jet?" he said. "Did she have a doctor's appointment today or something? I'm the one who messed up her legs, you know. I should have killed her. I'm sure you've heard the story from her side. Well, now you're going to hear it from my side."

"I'm not interested."

He raised the pistol and shot a hole in the wall behind me. Six inches to the left and it would have been my head. I leaned over and vomited on the floor.

"You need to be interested," he said.

I was dizzy, and the gunshot had left me partially deaf. His voice sounded like it was coming from a cardboard tube.

"I need medical attention," I said.

"She came home late one night," he said, ignoring my plea for help. "I asked her where she'd been. She came up with some lame-ass excuse, out with the girls from work or some such bullshit, so I asked her why she hadn't called to let me know. She didn't have an answer for that. Not a good one, anyway, so while she was strutting on back to the bedroom, I came up from behind and kicked her right in that pretty little ass of hers. I mean I kicked her good, mister, with a size ten cowboy boot. She fell to the floor and started sobbing, like she always does, but I didn't give a shit. I was hungry, and I was pissed about having to cook my own supper while she was out gallivanting around. Do you blame me? I walked on back to the kitchen and tended to the pork chops I had frying on the stove, and a few minutes later here she comes. She pulls a knife out of the cutlery block on the countertop, and she says, 'Willy, this is the last time, you son of a bitch. Get out of my house, or I'm going to cut your balls off.' She called me a son of a bitch. Can you imagine that? I told her this ain't her house, it's *my* house, and if anyone's going to be getting out, it's going to be *her*. She came at me with that knife, and if I hadn't done something, I do believe she would have killed me with it. I had to defend myself, you know?"

"I need help," I said. "Please."

I was shivering all over. Going into shock. Dying. I couldn't believe that this idiot's muffled voice was going to be the last thing I heard before drifting into oblivion.

"I did the only thing I could do under the circumstances," he said. "I grabbed the skillet by the handle and slung hot grease on her legs. I could have gone for her face, you know, but that would have been cruel. So I slung the hot grease on her, and she just stood there looking stupid for a second. Then she dropped the knife and ran into the bathroom and started running cold water on her feet and lower legs where I'd burnt her. I told her I was sorry, but she called the cops anyway. When they came, she denied ever coming at me with that knife. They arrested me, and an ambulance came and took her to the hospital. I got the shitty end of the stick, as usual. They should have arrested *her*. It was obviously a case of self-defense, and that's the plea we're going to trial with."

"Ambulance," I said. "Nine-one-one. Just give me a phone and—"

"I came over here today to talk. That's all. I never expected to have to use the gun, but my emotions got the best of me when I saw you standing by the window. *My* window, in *my* bedroom, by the bed *I* should be sleeping in and making love to my wife in. You should be ashamed of yourself, mister. Jet is a married woman."

I didn't waste my breath trying to deny his accusations again. It was a waste of time. He had his mind made up that I was this Jet person's lover, and there was nothing I could say to make him think otherwise. He'd already polished off half the vodka. He was drunk and trigger-happy and I didn't want to antagonize him into firing the pistol again.

Diana thought she had covered all the bases, but who could have guessed that the homeowner's estranged husband would get out of jail and show up with a gun just in time to prevent me from walking away from the mission unscathed? It was an utterly unpredictable contingency, a coincidence of the highest order, about as likely as the house being struck by an asteroid.

Yet here he was.

And here I was.

The pain had subsided, but my stomach kept roiling and lurching and trying to work its way up to my throat. Willy drank some more vodka. He was staring into space now, deep in thought.

Somewhere in the distance, I heard guitar music. Terry Vine. Why didn't he come and rescue me? Surely he'd heard the gunshots.

But of course he couldn't come and rescue me, because he was only a figment of my imagination. Was that right? Could that be true? Was I really a nutjob? Would my mind ever be right again?

The music stopped. A hush fell over the room as I faded in and out

of consciousness.

Then I heard Terry again.

And then it was quiet again.

And then I heard a car door slam.

CHAPTER THIRTY

My mouth was dry, my body cold. My chest felt as though someone had parked a rhinoceros on it.

The front door opened, and two women walked in. My vision was blurry, and I couldn't tell for sure, but I thought one of them might be my wife.

Willy got up and pointed the gun at them.

"Come on in, ladies," he said. "The party's just getting started."

I thought I heard Juliet say, "Nicholas, is that you?"

I didn't answer. It was another hallucination. Had to be.

"What do you want, Willy?" the other woman said.

I assumed the woman standing beside my hallucination was Jet. Maybe she was even real.

"I want you to get your ass over here like I told you to," Willy said.

"You're not supposed to be here."

"But I am here, so now you're going to have to deal with me."

"I'm not scared of you," Jet said.

Willy aimed the pistol a couple of feet from the doorway and squeezed off a round. Once again, the thunderous *BOOM* rattled me to the core. The two women screamed and cowered back and huddled together against the door.

"Did that get your attention?" Willy said. "Next one goes in your leg. Now get over here and sit down like I told you to."

The women came and sat on the couch, Jet on the far end and Juliet in the middle next to me.

Juliet leaned over and whispered, her voice quivering between sobs: "Nicholas, I'm so scared. What's going on here?"

I ignored her. I refused to give in to my diseased mind.

"What do you want?" Jet said to Willy.

"I want to know why you've been messing around with Mr. Crossbow here. Me and you are still married, in case you forgot."

"I'm working on getting that changed. And for your information, I haven't been messing around with anyone. I've never even seen this guy before."

"Don't lie to me. What's he doing walking in and out of this house like he owns the place, then?"

"I'm telling you, Willy, I've never seen him before. Why can't you believe me? But even if I was seeing him, it would be none of your business. I've been through with you since the night you did this."

Jet pointed to the gauze bandages wrapped around her legs.

"I told you I was sorry about that," Willy said. "What else you want

me to do?"

"I want you to get out of my life. Forever. I want you to get up and walk out of here right now and never come back."

"You don't mean that," Willy said.

"I do mean it. I don't ever want to see you again."

Willy took a swig of vodka. His expression went from ornery to somber.

"But I love you, baby," he said. "You're all I got. If you don't want me anymore, then I might as well blow my own brains out."

"Do me a favor," Jet said. "Go outside and do it. This is new carpet, and I just painted the walls last month."

Willy laughed. "You won't have to worry about any of that, because I ain't going out alone. If I can't have you, nobody's going to have you. Especially Mr. Crossbow here."

"She didn't mean it," I said. "I'm sure you all can work this out. There's no reason for anyone to die today. I'm begging you, Willy. Please. Call an ambulance. I'll tell them the shooting was an accident."

Juliet had her face against my arm. She was crying uncontrollably now. I could actually feel the warmth and wetness of her tears.

"Oh, I most certainly did mean it," Jet said. "I meant every word of it. You can go ahead and shoot me if you—"

Before she said *want to*, Willy raised the pistol and drilled one into her forehead. Dead center. Her once-perfect skull now had a gaping hole the size of a nickel in it. She sat there for a second with a stunned expression on her face, and then she toppled sideways.

Juliet screamed. She flung her arms around me and buried her head in my chest and started wailing. She felt real, and she sounded real, but I knew she wasn't real. No more real than Terry Vine playing guitar in the garage. I wanted to push her aside, but I didn't have the strength.

"That was a pretty good shot," Willy said. "Don't you think? Now I'm wondering if I should shoot you next, Mr. Crossbow, or just sit here and enjoy my drink for a while and watch you bleed. What do you think?"

"You don't want to know what I think," I said.

"Tell you what: I won't fire the gun again until the liquor gets down to here." He pointed to a spot on the bottle, just below the bottom of the label. "I figure that'll give us about ten more minutes to chat. How's that sound?"

"Swell," I said.

"Now, if that woman sitting beside you there will just shut up, we can continue our conversation in peace."

"What?"

"Tell her to stop that bawling, man. It's annoying."

“Jules, look at me,” I said.

She slowly raised her head. Her eyes were bloodshot, her face shiny with tears.

She was real.

I knew she was real, because Willy could see her too.

“I want to go home,” she said. “I just want to go home.”

“What are you doing here?” I said.

“Jet was my patient,” she said. “And she was my friend.”

She started crying again.

I turned to Willy.

“Let her go,” I said. “She didn’t have anything to do with any of this. Let her walk away. You can kill me, and then you can kill yourself if you want to.”

Willy massaged his chin, considering that.

“I want to hear you say it first,” he said. “I want to hear you admit that you’ve been having relations with my old lady.”

Juliet looked up at me. She was sniffing. She looked confused.

“If I admit that Jet and I were having an affair, you’ll let Juliet go?” I said.

“Juliet. Is that her name? Sure, I’ll let her go. Why not? She’s aggravating the shit out of me with all that screaming and crying, anyway. But you have to look me in the eyes and tell me first. And a simple yes won’t do it. I want details. If I think you’re making shit up, I’ll make you watch her die. Hard. So yeah, it’s a deal. You tell me all about it, and I’ll let her go. But first, I need to take a piss.”

Willy stood and turned his back to us and unzipped his pants. He urinated on the carpet and took a long pull from the bottle at the same time.

While he was doing that, I whispered in Juliet’s ear: “There’s a broken window around back,” I said. “If you climb in, you’ll see a backpack on the floor. There’s a gun in the backpack.”

Juliet nodded.

Willy zipped up, turned around, sat back down on the ottoman.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s hear the story.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

My bleeding had slowed to a trickle. Either I was running out of blood, or the wounds had partially clotted off. Maybe a combination of both.

There was no way I could have stood, or even crawled, but my head felt a little better than it had a few minutes ago. I thought maybe I was strong enough to placate Willy with some lies, hoping he would be true to his word then and let Juliet go.

"There's not that much to tell," I said. "I was at the grocery store one day, and I met her there. In the produce section. We were both looking at the grapefruits. I asked her what happened to her legs, and she said she'd been in a car accident. We got to talking about this and that, and one thing led to another. We met casually a couple of times, and then one night she invited me over here to her house."

"Did she tell you she was married?" Willy said.

"No. I didn't know she was married. Not until today."

"When was the first time you had sex with her?"

"That first night she invited me over. It was a month ago last Wednesday. I remember, because last Wednesday she kept saying it was our one month anniversary."

"Did she like it?" Willy said.

"Pardon me?"

"The sex. Did she like it?"

I looked at Willy, trying to figure out what he wanted me to say.

I decided to take a chance.

"I guess she liked it," I said. "But there were times she didn't want anything to do with me. Some kind of hormonal thing, she said."

Willy bought it. He took a hit on the vodka.

"I didn't come here to kill anybody," he said. "I just wanted to see Jet."

Juliet had settled down. Willy was the one bawling now.

"There doesn't have to be any more bloodshed," I said. "Call the police and turn yourself in. They'll send an ambulance and—"

"No way," Willy said. "I ain't going back to jail."

He held the vodka bottle up and looked at it.

"You promised to let Juliet go," I said.

He pointed the gun at her, closed one eye and took aim. His drunken finger trembled against the trigger, and then he lowered the barrel.

"Get out of here," he said.

"I can go?" Juliet said.

“Yeah.”

Juliet rose. She wiped her eyes and face with her hands. She looked me in the eyes, gave me a slight nod, turned and walked toward the front door. She exited without looking back.

The .357 in my backpack was just like the one we had at home. Juliet knew how to use it. I knew she did, because I'd taught her. Sometimes her scores at the firing range were better than mine. All she needed to do was climb in the window and get the gun and sneak back into the living room. Willy would never know what hit him.

I just needed to keep him engaged for a few more minutes. I needed to give him a reason to hold off on shooting me.

“Mind if I have a drink of that?” I said, gesturing toward the vodka bottle.

He held it up and tilted it, assessing the volume.

“There's not much left,” he said. “I need to be good and drunk, and I'm not quite there yet.”

He was there. That's the thing about alcohol. Sometimes it keeps you from realizing just how inebriated you really are. It's why people party all night and then get behind the wheel of a car.

“You wouldn't deny a condemned man one last drink,” I said. “Would you, Willy? Come on, man. It's just me and you now. If you're going to kill me, we might as well go out as friends.”

He sat there and stared at nothing. He was practically in a stupor.

“All right,” he said. “Forget about what I said before. We'll drink till it's gone, and then I'll put us both out of our misery.”

He straightened his arm and held the bottle toward me. I looked through it, at the distorted image of a sociopath, a man whose sole purpose in life was to bring misery to others. I looked through the bottle, and in my peripheral vision I saw the beautiful young woman named Jet whose life had been wasted. She'd died for nothing. All because she'd been unlucky enough to hook up with this asshole. A furious rage boiled through me, and I did something completely spontaneous. Something I hadn't planned on. In one swift motion, I grabbed the vodka bottle by the neck and broke it against the coffee table and lurched forward and jammed the sharp jagged end into Willy's face and twisted it like a screwdriver. He screamed. He stood and dropped the gun and pressed his hands against the monstrous incisions I'd made and jumped up and down, wailing like a little kid who knows his whole day has just been ruined.

Blood gushed through Willy's fingers, quickly saturating the front of his T-shirt. He took his hands away and gazed in astonishment at the bright red viscous goo covering them. There was a flap of glistening meat where his left cheek had been, and the tip of his nose was dangling by a single thread of cartilage. I could see his molars on the

left side through the new window I'd created.

A massive dose of adrenaline pumped through me, fueling me like the afterburner on a jet fighter. I knew I only had one chance. I rolled off the couch onto the coffee table, and off the coffee table onto the floor, not feeling or even caring about the bits of broken glass digging into me, and went for the gun. I stretched, reaching for it with every ounce of my remaining energy, but it was just beyond my grasp. I tried to scoot, inching toward it, reaching, reaching, reaching. It was only a couple of inches away now. I touched the cold steel barrel with the tip of my middle finger. I grunted and strained and nearly had a grip on it with my thumb and forefinger when Willy casually bent down and picked it up off the floor.

He pointed the gun at my head and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Nothing happened. The gun didn't fire. It must have jammed.

I rolled onto my back. I was spent. A fly landed on my forehead, and I didn't even have the strength to shoo it away. The simple act of breathing had become a major effort.

Willy was a mess. He stood there fiddling with the magazine, trying to figure out why the gun had failed.

"Piece of shit," he said.

Or at least that's what he tried to say. The slashes and gashes on his jaw had resulted in something of a speech impediment.

He aimed the gun and tried again.

CLICK.

Again.

CLICK.

Every time he pulled the trigger, I pissed my pants a little more.

He yanked the magazine out and emptied it on the coffee table and started re-loading the cartridges one by one. It was a simple task. But Willy was very drunk, so he had to concentrate intensely on what he was doing. He moved in extreme slow motion, and with painstaking attention to detail. He'd finally managed to line up four of the remaining five shells when a loud crunching sound came from the bedroom.

Juliet.

She must have climbed into the window and stepped on the pile of broken glass on the carpet.

Willy slammed the magazine back into the butt of the pistol.

"You stay here," he said. "I'll be right back."

"Wait. I just want to tell you how sorry I am, Willy. I know a surgeon in South America who can fix your face. I have money. I could help you get out of the country. Tonight. We'll wrap some bandages around your—"

"Shut up," he said.

I lay there helpless as Willy stormed down the hall toward the bedroom. My only hope was that Juliet would quickly find the .357 and shoot Willy as soon as he opened the bedroom door.

"What are you doing?" Willy shouted.

A shot was fired. Then another.

I heard the sound of glass breaking, a lamp maybe, and then a sickening thud as someone hit the floor.

I expected my dear sweet Juliet to come running around the corner. I expected her to kneel at my side and embrace me and kiss my hot

forehead and tell me everything was going to be all right. I expected her to call 911 and summons the medical attention I desperately needed.

But that's not what happened. Juliet did not come running around the corner.

All my hopes for any kind of future faded as Willy emerged from the arched threshold to the hallway. Staggering, bleeding, sweating. He had the semi-automatic pistol in one hand and the .357 revolver in the other. He looked gruesome, like something from a horror movie.

But in the movies, the monster is always defeated in the end. Not so in real life.

"She tried to kill me," he said, the combination of the booze in his system and the lacerations on his face making his speech barely comprehensible now. "Why would she do that? I was nice to her. I let her go."

"Where is she?" I said.

"I shot her. Had no choice. And now, since you wasted all my vodka, I'm going to have to shoot you too, Mr. Crossbow. And I'm not going to have to depend on this piece-of-shit nine millimeter."

He tossed the semi-automatic aside, pointed the .357 at my head, and cocked the hammer back.

I'd always wondered if you would hear the gunshot, the one that sent a bullet tearing through your brain. I wondered if you would feel it, if only for an instant. Would it hurt? Would it be the worst headache imaginable for the briefest of moments, or would all pain stop instantaneously? And then what? What would happen once the brain was completely destroyed?

I'd always believed there had to be something beyond what we experience here in the physical world, that death didn't result in a completely black and nonexistent oblivion. I'd always believed it, and apparently my belief was going to be tested soon.

I'd always wondered if you would hear the gunshot.

And I did.

The thunderous boom sent an icy cold wave of silvery liquid current through me, as though my spine had been injected with water from the Arctic Sea.

I didn't feel any pain.

There was no bright light to follow.

There was only darkness.

Only darkness, until I opened my eyes and saw Diana Dawkins standing there with a smoking gun in her hand.

Willy was on the floor, a few feet to my left. He had a nice fat bullet hole through his right eye socket, which balanced out the damage I'd done to the left side of his face with the broken vodka bottle.

"Nicholas, are you all right?"

"No," I said. "I'm not all right. I'm dying. I need help."

"Can you walk?"

"No. I can't even lift my head."

Diana looked around the room, trying to figure out what had happened.

I knew that in time everything inside of me would come crashing down hard, but at the moment I was emotionally numb. Like when you sleep on your arm the wrong way and you wake up and it's a dead thing that doesn't even seem to be a part of you anymore.

I spoke to Diana in a monotone, robotic voice, as if I were trying to explain an algebra problem.

"That woman on the couch is the homeowner," I said, struggling not to pass out. "Her name is Jet. The guy you shot is her estranged husband. Willy. He showed up right when I was about to leave."

"Is there, or was there, anyone else in the house?" Diana said.

"My wife is in the back bedroom. Willy shot her a few minutes ago."

"Your wife?"

"She works part-time for a home health agency," I said. "Apparently Jet was her patient."

"I'll go check on her."

Diana walked back to the bedroom. She returned a couple of minutes later, furiously working a cell phone with her thumbs.

"Do I want to know?" I said.

"She's alive, but only barely. Here's how this is going to work: I'll make an anonymous nine-one-one call for your wife. County rescue will pick her up and take her to the hospital. Homicide detectives will follow, of course, and Jet and Willy will be coroner's cases. We need for this to look like a domestic violence issue, where Juliet just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"What about me?"

"There's no reason for anyone to know that you were here. I have some of our guys coming for you, in an unmarked ambulance. They'll take you to hospital, wheel you into the ER and then disappear."

"But when Juliet wakes up, she'll remember everything that happened, and—"

"I gave her a shot," Diana said. "The drug I told you about the first day I met you. She won't remember anything that happened in the past twenty-four hours."

"How convenient."

"Convenient, and essential. And I'm afraid I'm going to have to give you a dose as well."

"Why? I'm not going to tell anyone what really happened."

"There are too many contingencies at this point," Diana said. "It's in

everyone's best interest if you totally forget about the assassination attempt and everything that followed."

She reached into her backpack and pulled out a syringe and a tiny glass vial. She uncapped the needle, pierced the vial's port, and drew up the medication.

"I don't want that," I said.

"Believe me, it's for your own good. You'll fall asleep for a while, and when you wake up, the past twenty-four hours will be a blank."

She jabbed the hypodermic into my right thigh and pushed the plunger.

There was nothing I could do to stop her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I woke up with a dull ache in my right side. I looked around. I was in the hospital.

I threw back the top sheet and saw a rubber tube about the diameter of a drinking straw coming out of the lower right side of my belly. There was a bulb the size of a hand grenade attached to the end of the tube. Dark red blood oozed from the tube to the bulb. It was half full. Or half empty, depending on your level of optimism.

There were six electrodes pasted to my chest, with six wires attached to them. The wires terminated in a harness attached to a little gray box nestled between my left hip and the left side rail. The box reminded me of a remote control, only there were no buttons on it. An IV snaked from my left arm to a pump on a pole. A bag of fluid hung there. D5LR, whatever that meant. The digital readout on the pump said it was being infused at a rate of one hundred milliliters per hour. There was a tube hissing into my nostrils, what they call a nasal canula. It delivered oxygen at the rate prescribed. I'd learned a few things from being in hospitals before, and a few things from being married to Juliet.

I pressed the NURSE CALL button on the bedrail. A female voice answered.

"May I help you?"

"I want to see my nurse," I said.

"Can I tell her what you need?"

"I need to talk to her. Where am I?"

"The trauma unit. Your nurse will be with you shortly."

"Thanks."

The last thing I remembered was talking to Juliet in the bathroom at home. She had proven to me that Terry Vine wasn't real. The guitar had been the clincher, the Telecaster Deluxe I'd sold five years ago. Terry Vine was a hallucination. And if he wasn't real, maybe some other things weren't real either.

Like Diana Dawkins.

Apparently, I had lost my mind.

There was a plastic pitcher on my bedside table and a stack of Styrofoam drinking cups. I reached over and poured myself a cup of water and took a drink. Almost immediately, I felt nauseated.

My nurse walked in. Her nametag said Pam, RN, BSN. Green scrubs, strawberry blond hair, athletic build.

"Give me that," she said. She took the drinking cup from my hand. "You're supposed to be NPO."

“What’s that mean?”

“Nothing by mouth. I don’t know who left a pitcher of water here, but they shouldn’t have.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know.”

She walked around to the other side of the bed and checked the IV pump.

“You received some blood in surgery,” she said. “But your H and H is still low. I’m going to have to give you two more units tonight. The doctor will be in shortly to get your consent.”

“What happened to me?”

“You came in with a gunshot wound. You were in the operating room for several hours, and then they transferred you here from the post anesthesia care unit.”

“Who gave consent for all that?”

“It was an emergency. If they hadn’t taken care of you right away, you would have died.”

“Who shot me?” I said.

“You don’t remember?”

I looked up at the ceiling. Tried to take a deep breath, but it hurt. The television was on, and they were talking about the president’s car breaking down during the drive from Gainesville to Jacksonville. Something about the wrong type of fuel being pumped into the gas tank. I figured someone was going to be in big trouble over that.

“I don’t remember anything,” I said “Did my wife bring me here?”

“That’s another thing the doctor will want to talk to you about. And the police. A couple of EMT guys wheeled you into the ER on a stretcher, and then they took off without giving the trauma nurse any sort of report. Nothing. They just disappeared. We don’t know what company they were with or anything. First time that’s ever happened, as far as I know.”

“What’s this tube coming out of my belly?”

She pulled back the sheet.

“It’s called a JP drain,” she said. “I better empty it.”

She left for a minute, came back with a plastic beaker. She pulled a little stopper out of the end of the bulb and drained the blood. She squeezed the bulb flat, and then replaced the stopper.

“It creates suction,” she said. “Like when you squeeze the end of an ear dropper to draw the medication. When it inflates, it needs to be emptied and squeezed again.”

“I’ll keep an eye on it.”

“Good. I’ll come in and check on it from time to time, but let me know if you think it needs to be emptied.”

“I need to call my wife,” I said. “Is there a phone in here?”

“The phone’s right there on your nightstand. But like I said, the

doctor will be in to talk to you shortly.”

“About my wife?”

“Among other things.”

“Is there a problem?” I said. “Is there some reason I shouldn’t call my wife?”

“The doctor will be in to talk to you shortly.”

“But you’re here now,” I said. “Just tell me. I have a right to know.”

She turned and walked out of the room without saying another word.

“Hey,” I shouted. “I want to talk to you.”

She didn’t come back. I grabbed the phone and tried Juliet’s number. No answer.

I tried Brittney, but she didn’t answer either. I hadn’t talked to her since our little argument about the dormitory versus an apartment. Maybe she was still mad at me about that.

I needed to get some information from somebody, and I didn’t feel like waiting around for the doctor. I sat up and pulled the nasal canula off and the wires going to my chest. A couple of alarms started wailing, one of them a continuous high-pitched tone and the other a series of obnoxious beeps. I was about to rip the IV out of my arm when Pam and a man wearing a long white lab coat came running into the room.

“What are you doing?” Pam said. She reached over and shut off the alarms.

“I’m leaving. I need to find my wife.”

“This is Dr. Arya. He’s going to talk to you now. Just settle down, okay?”

“I’ll settle down when I get some answers,” I said.

She checked on the IV pump, and the line going into my arm.

“I’ll be at the nurses’ station if you need me,” she said to the doctor.

He nodded, and Pam left the room.

The doctor was tall and thin. He had thick black hair and a dark complexion and wire-rimmed eyeglasses and a clean shave and a clipboard. I recognized the accent when he introduced himself. He was from India.

“I performed your surgery earlier,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

“My side’s killing me, and I can hardly breathe.”

“Here, let’s put your oxygen back on.”

He donned a pair of gloves and guided the nasal canula back into position.

“Thanks,” I said.

“You lost a lot of blood. That’s why you’re having trouble breathing. I want to give you two more units tonight, and I have the consent form here. Let me just take a few minutes to explain the benefits and

the risks of a blood transfusion.”

“Pam said you would talk to me about my wife. Her name’s Juliet Colt. Her maiden name was Dakila. I want to know what’s going on with her before I sign anything.”

“Your wife was also the victim of a gunshot wound,” Dr. Arya said. “She actually got to the ER before you did, and we know the circumstances behind her injuries. Unlike yours.”

I felt my stomach tighten.

“What happened?” I said.

“She was visiting a home health patient when the patient’s estranged husband came in. He wasn’t supposed to be there. He was in violation of a restraining order. Apparently there was some alcohol involved, and then there was a shootout. It has been all over the news.”

“Where is she?” I said, fearing the worst. “Where’s Juliet now?”

“She is on the third floor, in the intensive care unit.”

“Is she going to be all right?”

“I am not her surgeon, but I have talked to her surgeon. So I am somewhat familiar with the case. It is too early to say whether she is going to be all right or not. Right now, her vital signs are stable, and her surgeon has stopped the bleeding. But she is not responding to any sort of stimuli. So far, they have not been able to arouse her from her sleep.”

“What are you saying?” I said. “Is she brain-dead, or what?”

“No, the EEG shows brain activity. She just won’t wake up. *Yet*. The next few days will be crucial in determining her prognosis. She might regain consciousness in the next five minutes. Or, she might never regain consciousness.”

“I want to see her.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible at the moment. Maybe if your condition improves over the next couple of days, we can arrange for you to be wheeled down there for a few minutes.”

My emotions swirled, like multiple shades of red stirred together in a paint can. I didn’t know whether to cry or start lashing out with a string of expletives. Or maybe punch this guy in the nose. One way or another, I was on the edge of losing it.

He must have sensed my anxiety.

“I’ll tell your nurse to bring you something for pain,” he said. “And something to help you relax.”

“No narcotics,” I said. “I have a history of addiction.”

“That’s okay. We have some other medications we can try. Now, can I go over this consent form with you?”

“All right.”

He started talking, but my mind was elsewhere. I didn’t care about

the transfusion. I just wanted Juliet to wake up. I wanted everything to be back to normal again.

He handed me the clipboard, and I signed on the line where it said patient consent.

"I'll send Pam in with the medicine, and we'll get the transfusion going as soon as possible. I think you'll breathe easier once you get some more blood in you."

"Thanks, doctor. I definitely need something."

He started to leave the room, but then he turned around and faced me again when he got to the door.

"One more thing about your wife," he said.

"What's that?"

"You know she's pregnant, right?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Five weeks, six days, and seventeen hours later, I left home in my 1996 GMC Jimmy and headed toward my teaching studio. I needed to get there and open up before 4:30.

I drove fast.

I was running late.

The doctors had finally isolated an infection in my blood, something with a long name that I couldn't ever seem to remember. They'd kept me on the trauma unit for two weeks, administering heavy-duty antibiotics around the clock, and then had moved me to the psychiatric unit. It took me ten days to convince the shrinks I wasn't a threat to myself or others. They prescribed a couple of different medications and sent me on my way.

But the pills were expensive, and they made me feel terrible, so I stopped taking them. I didn't need the medicine. I was doing fine without it.

Juliet still wasn't responding to stimuli. She still wouldn't wake up. She had a feeding tube and a urinary catheter and a permanent IV in her chest called a port-a-cath. My poor darling was in a vegetative state, and it broke my heart every minute of every day. I would have traded places with her if I could have. It wasn't fair. She was such a beautiful person.

The ultrasound said the baby was a boy.

I'd had no idea that Juliet was pregnant. Eight weeks, as it turned out. Almost fourteen now. It was a total shock, and I think the additional stress of knowing that I was going to be a daddy again—maybe a single parent this time—might have delayed my recovery from the gunshot wound.

It was stressful, but also very wonderful.

The doctors said as long as they could keep Juliet alive, the fetus would keep growing inside her. It was quite possible she could carry him to term, they said. The baby was normal and healthy, and at the right time he would be welcomed into the world via Cesarean section.

And I would take care of him best I could.

I steered the Jimmy into my favorite parking place, got out and grabbed a stack of mail before opening the door to the studio and walking inside. I stood at the counter and went through it all. There was an electric bill, a catalog from a music store, an advance payment from one of my students, and a past due notice from the anesthesiologist at the hospital.

And a credit card offer with a tiny red dot on the lower left hand

corner of the envelope.

I scooted everything else aside and opened the envelope with trembling fingers.

Dear Nicholas,

I wanted to thank you for doing such a wonderful job for me. There are parts of it you don't remember now, parts you will never remember, but let me assure you our country would not be the same if not for your valiant efforts. The attached pages will fill you in on some of the details, but it's imperative that you keep these details to yourself. I've been monitoring your recovery, and I'm happy to see that you're back to work at the teaching studio.

So sorry your wife was not as lucky. I know it looks grim for her, but please don't give up hope. There's still a chance she will wake up from the coma. I've seen it happen, more than once.

As promised, I have paid you for your help. A check in the amount of \$300,000 has been deposited into an offshore account, in your name. All the information you'll need to make withdrawals is on the back of this page. Commit it to memory, and then burn this letter and the envelope it came in.

Also, as I said from the beginning, I might be contacting you again from time to time. Your microchip has been fully activated, and you are now considered an associate operative for The Circle. We have the ability to track your whereabouts, and you will feel a tingling sensation at the site of your blood tattoo when we want you to call in for an assignment. Use the number on the back of this page, and use the codename Bullfrog.

We won't be requiring your services often, maybe only every six months or so, but when we call it's crucial that you answer. Otherwise, we want you to carry on with your music business, and your other normal day-to-day activities. I understand there's going to be a new addition to your family soon. Congratulations.

Thanks again, Nicholas. It was a pleasure to work with you. I'll be in touch.

The letter was real.

I could see it.

I could feel it.

I could smell it.

I could hear it when I crinkled it with my fingers. I could taste it when I put it to my tongue.

Despite the conclusions the psychiatrists had come to regarding Terry Vine, I was certain now that Diana Dawkins was not a hallucination. I was certain that the ultra-secret government agency

called The Circle was not a delusion my mind had created in response to a rare blood infection.

Just to make sure, I logged onto the website for the offshore bank account and entered the user name and password Diana had written on the back of her letter. The account details consisted of exactly one transaction, a deposit in the amount of \$300,000. It was right there in black and white.

Diana Dawkins was real, and Nicholas Colt was rich.

Not most people's idea of rich, maybe, but three hundred grand would definitely take care of mine and Juliet's co-pays on the medical bills, and there would be enough left over to get started on the expansion plans for my music business. It was the most money I'd had at one time since my band's heyday.

I folded the letter and slid it back into the envelope, and then folded the envelope in half and stuck it in my back pocket. Later, after I finished with my last student for the evening, I would take it out to the Airstream and torch it.

I had mixed feelings about being an associate member of The Circle now. I'd known from the beginning that Diana might contact me from time to time, but it seemed more official now that I'd read the letter. I just hoped it wouldn't be anytime soon.

My cell phone vibrated. It was Brittney. She'd finished her sophomore year at the University of Florida, and she was home for the summer. Apparently she'd given up on the idea of an apartment in Gainesville for now. She hadn't mentioned it since school let out.

"Have you been to see Mom today?" she said.

"Not yet. I'll go tonight."

"I was there a while ago, and I think I saw her eyelids flutter. She was trying to wake up, Dad! Wouldn't that be just wonderful?"

"It would," I said. "But I don't want you to get your hopes up too much. You know what the doctor said—that her muscles might twitch involuntarily from time to time. It doesn't mean anything."

"I know, but this was different. I was talking to her when it happened. It was like she was trying to respond. I think she heard me, and she was struggling to climb out of the darkness."

"Did anyone else see it?"

"No. She stopped when the nurse came in. But *I* saw it. I think she's going to wake up soon. Maybe even tomorrow. I think everything's going to be all right, Daddy. I just have a feeling, you know?"

"I hope you're right, sweetheart. I really do."

We talked for a little while longer, and then disconnected.

I looked at my watch.

It was Thursday.

4:30.

I stared at the door for a few minutes, as I had every Thursday for the past several weeks, but Terry Vine never walked through it.

Thanks so much for reading BLOOD TATTOO!

My Nicholas Colt thriller series includes nine full-length novels: *COLT*, *LADY 52*, *POCKET-47*, *CROSSCUT*, *SNUFF TAG 9*, *KEY DEATH*, *BLOOD TATTOO*, *SYCAMORE BLUFF*, and *THE JACK REACHER FILES: FUGITIVE* (Previously Published as *ANNEX 1*).

All of my books are lendable, so feel free to share them with a friend at no additional cost.

All reviews are much appreciated!

If you would like to read the first five chapters of SYCAMORE BLUFF, please turn the page.

CHAPTER ONE

“How does it feel to be dead?” The Director asked.

“Lousy,” Diana said, speaking to him from the surveillance van on an encrypted cell phone. He was in Washington, and she was in Florida, and neither of them sounded very happy at the moment.

“I put you through this little training exercise to see if your skills had been affected by the incident last month. I hate to say it, but it seems to me you’ve lost a step or two.”

Last month, Diana had been forced to kill a fellow operative, a member of her own team. It was the hardest thing she’d ever done. Now, after several weeks on administrative leave, she’d failed to survive a mock chase scenario where she’d been pursued by four enemy agents with automatic rifles. Normally, she could have aced the exercise blindfolded.

“I’ll do better next time,” Diana said. “Just give me another chance.”

“It’s been several weeks, but you obviously haven’t been able to get it out of your head yet.”

“I’m over it. Trust me.”

“I trust you, Di. But what happened last month would have taken its toll on any of us. It messes with your head in a thousand different ways, and the counseling sessions can only go so far. It’s going to take time. That’s what you need to realize now. You haven’t rebounded to a hundred percent yet, and there’s no point in pretending that you have.”

“I need to work,” Diana said. “This is what I do. I can’t go back on leave. I’ll go nuts. Do you know how many episodes of *Law and Order* I’ve watched over the past few weeks?”

“I’m taking you off the CIAO assignment,” The Director said.

“That’s not fair. You can’t do that. I’ve put too much work into it. You can’t just hand it all over to another agent now.”

CIAO. The Citizens’ Initiative Against Oppression, a homegrown terrorist group Diana had been following for over a year.

“I have something else for you,” The Director said. “Another job. You don’t have to go back on leave if you don’t want to.”

Diana tried to curb her anger. Losing her cool now would only feed into The Director’s current negative assessment of her. She had to be careful. She needed to pick her battles wisely, or he might put her on a desk assignment for a year or more, maybe even permanently. She’d seen it happen with other operatives, and she didn’t want it to happen to her. She needed to be out in the field doing things. She would go

stir crazy behind a desk.

And maybe The Director had a point. Maybe the incident last month *had* affected her performance. She didn't feel as though it had, but maybe it had affected her on a subconscious level. That was what the counselor kept digging at, but so far the sessions had proved fruitless.

"I really don't think it's fair for you to take me off the CIAO assignment," she said. "But of course I'll do whatever you want me to do. What kind of job did you have in mind?"

"There's a town in Indiana called Sycamore Bluff. Population six hundred and twelve. Officially, it doesn't exist. You won't find it on any maps. There are no roads in or out, and three sides of the perimeter are guarded by an eight-foot electric fence topped with razor ribbon. The fourth side is guarded by a stand of very old sycamore trees, and a rock cliff with a hundred foot drop to a dry creek bed. Hence the name Sycamore Bluff. The face of the cliff is concave, impossible to climb up or rappel down. Anyone sent there is transported via helicopter, and all of the town's food and water and other supplies are shipped in that way as well. The residents can communicate with each other, through a closed system of cell phone antennas, but they're not allowed to make contact with the outside world."

"Sounds like a prison," Di said.

"It's not a prison. It's a social experiment. Everyone who lives there does so voluntarily, although at the outset they agreed to stay there for six years. It's a microcosm, if you will, sort of like Biosphere Two, only it's not totally enclosed, and they don't grow vegetables or anything. This phase of the experiment is due to end March first, by the way."

In the history of the United States, Diana knew of only one secret government town, and that one had been part of the Manhattan Project. The fact there was another one piqued her interest greatly.

"A social experiment," she said. "Who set this experiment up?"

"NASA, working in conjunction with the United States Air Force. I'll give you a full briefing before you go in. If, that is, you agree to go in."

"So what's the purpose of this experiment? Why are these volunteers contracted to stay there for six years? Why would anyone agree to that kind of isolation for that length of time?"

"The purpose is simple," The Director said. "To see if a society, given a limited setting and a strict set of rules, can evolve into something close to a true democracy. There is no mayor in Sycamore Bluff, no hierarchy of citizenship, no police force, no law enforcement of any kind. The people there have jobs to keep them busy, and various forms of entertainment to help them relax. They don't get

paychecks per se, but all of their needs are taken care of. It's a study on human behavior, and NASA hopes the results will be useful for future generations interested in space colonization. Specifically, colonization on the planet Mars."

"Sounds like science fiction," Di said.

"So did smart phones thirty years ago."

"Good point. You said something about *this phase* of the experiment. What did you mean by that?"

"Some of the military guys jokingly refer to Sycamore Bluff as the six-six-six experiment. The participants were initially required to stay in an underground bunker for six months, to simulate the time it would take to travel to Mars in a spaceship. Then, after their six year period in the town, they'll go underground for six more months to simulate the trip back to Earth. Six months to get there, a six year stay, and then six months to get home."

"So it's really a total of seven years," Diana said. "That's quite a commitment."

"Believe me, they're being well compensated for it. *If* they hang in for the duration. If someone decides to bail out at any time—and a few have—they lose the entire paycheck they would have gotten if they had stayed. It's the old carrot-dangling-from-the-end-of-a-stick trick, only the participants who go the distance will be rewarded with the carrot in the end."

"It must be quite a carrot to keep them motivated for seven years. And are there more towns like this? In the United States?"

"There are," The Director said. "Quite a few, actually, each performing a different type of experiment. But Sycamore Bluff is the only one The Circle has any interest in. At the moment, anyway."

"And why does The Circle have any interest in Sycamore Bluff?" Diana asked.

"I'll tell you that when we meet in person. Are you interested?"

"I'm intrigued, I'll say that. If I go in there, I won't be required to stay for any certain length of time, like the other residents, will I?"

"Of course not. Once your mission is complete, a helicopter will come and fly you and your partner out of there."

"Partner?"

Diana didn't like the sound of that. She preferred working alone. Especially after what had happened last month.

"That's another thing," The Director said. "We need to send in a team to work undercover. A man and woman who can pass for husband and wife. All the residents of Sycamore Bluff are heterosexual couples without children."

"I don't know," Diana said. "Have you selected someone for the other half of the team yet?"

“No, but we’ll need to do that right away. Unfortunately, we’re short-handed after what happened with Henry Parker, and all the fulltime male operatives are busy with other assignments at the moment. I thought maybe you could choose a partner yourself, one of your freelancers. Any ideas?”

“Yes,” Diana said. “I think I know just the guy.”

CHAPTER TWO

The sign out front said Nicholas Colt's Conservatory of Music. It was a very nice sign, and Colt had paid a lot of money for it. Unlike most things in his life these days, it was constant, and it was good. He never got tired of looking at it.

He'd parked by the mailbox and had gone inside a few minutes ago, and now he was sitting on a stool behind the counter changing the strings on a 1967 Gibson Les Paul electric guitar. It was 2:51 p.m. on a Saturday, and Colt was expecting his first student of the day to walk in any minute.

As he worked on getting the guitar's D string in tune, he felt a tingle between the fourth and fifth toes of his left foot. There was a microchip embedded under the skin there, along with a red tattoo the size of a pencil eraser. The tattoo, a mark that identified him as a freelance operative for the ultra-secret government organization known as The Circle, could only be seen under a special light composed of a secret band of frequencies. The tingling meant he was supposed to call a certain number with the encrypted cell phone he'd been given. He was supposed to call as soon as possible, without hesitation, no matter what.

He set the guitar on the counter, walked over to the wall safe, and dialed in the combination. The phone was in the left rear corner of the hollow space, plugged into a dedicated electrical outlet that kept the battery fully charged at all times. Colt picked it up and turned it on and punched in the number. He'd committed it to memory months ago, but this was the first time he'd had to use it. He heard a series of clicks, and then the voice of a very pleasant female robot instructed him to enter his account number followed by the pound sign.

He entered the account number, which he had also committed to memory months ago, and a few seconds later another female voice—not quite as pleasant, but at least human—said, “Wild Canary.”

Colt knew the voice. It was Diana Dawkins. *Wild Canary* was her code name.

Colt responded with his own: “Bullfrog,” he said.

A pause, and then, “Hello, Nicholas. How are you?”

“Not too bad, I guess. Under the circumstances.”

The circumstances had thrown Colt into one of the darkest mental states he'd ever experienced. His wife had been in the hospital, completely unconscious, for almost seven months now. A gunshot wound had left her in a coma, and on top of everything else she was pregnant.

Brittney, Colt's adopted daughter, was doing well in the fall semester of her junior year at the University of Florida, and his guitar teaching studio was thriving. But without Juliet, he couldn't find the joy in any of it. His and Juliet's baby would be delivered soon, and then he would be forced to make the most difficult decision anyone could ever make: to keep his wife on life support, or to pull the plug and let her go.

"How is she?" Diana asked.

"The same," Colt said. "No change. The doctors say there's still some brain activity, but they're not sure how much."

"And the baby?"

"The baby's perfect. It's a boy. I haven't decided on a name yet, but he's perfect. He's the one ray of light in this whole miserable situation."

"I'm so sorry you're having to deal with all that, but I have something that might take your mind off it for a while."

"I can't help you right now, Diana. I just can't."

"You don't have a choice," she said. "I need you. Remember our arrangement? Of course you do. And I've been monitoring your bank accounts. You're almost out of money. You need me just as much as I need you."

Colt felt like hanging up. How could she possibly expect him to go out and play secret agent while his pregnant wife lay in critical condition? Juliet had a feeding tube, and a urinary catheter, and she had to be turned every two hours to prevent skin ulcers. Physical therapists came to her room and performed range of motion exercises several times a day to prevent muscle contractures. She required constant care. Juliet would probably never wake up, and it was partially Colt's fault. In fact, it was partially *Diana's* fault as well. If there were any justice in the world, The Circle would be paying half the bills. Or all of them.

"I'm doing all right," Colt said, responding to Diana's statement regarding his financial situation. "I have almost forty students now."

"You're paying your regular bills. I know that. But the medical expenses are astronomical, and Juliet's insurance isn't covering all of it. And, you're going to have a baby to care for soon. You probably don't even realize how expensive that's going to be."

Colt didn't like it that she knew so much about his personal business. She'd recruited him into the organization, and had paid him a large sum of money to help thwart an assassination attempt on the president, with the agreement that he would be available for other assignments from time to time. It seemed like a reasonable arrangement, until life got in the way.

"Why me?" Colt said. "Why can't you find someone else?"

“Because I can’t. All of the other experienced operatives are on assignments elsewhere. All but one, but I can’t use her on this job. It’s imperative that my partner be a man.”

Colt knew it was futile to argue with her. He’d agreed to work with her on the previous job, and he’d taken the money, and now The Circle pretty much owned him. For the rest of his life. Operatives who refused assignments had a nasty habit of disappearing.

“How much money are we talking about?” Colt asked.

“Same deal as last time. But there might be a bonus involved with this job. I can’t promise anything, but if things work out, I might be able to get you another hundred K.”

“Hold on,” Colt said. “My student just walked in.”

“Make it quick.”

Colt set the phone on the counter. He told his fourteen-year-old student, and the student’s father, that the lesson for today, and maybe for the next week or two, would have to be canceled. He said he would contact them as soon as he was able to resume the weekly sessions. He apologized, and encouraged the young man to practice on his own for now. After they left, he wrote a quick note and taped it on the front door, explaining the situation to his other students. He hoped none of them would try to find another instructor in the meantime, but he couldn’t really blame them if they did.

Colt picked up the phone. “I’m back,” he said. “So tell me about the job.”

“Meet me at the safe house in three hours. Six o’clock, no later. Pack for cold weather.”

“Should I pack a gun?”

“No. The Circle will provide us with weapons. Lock everything up at your studio and your house, because you won’t be going back home for a while.”

She hung up. Colt turned the lights off and locked the door. He took one last look at the sign out front as he climbed into his 1996 GMC Jimmy and headed for the hospital to visit his wife.

CHAPTER THREE

Juliet Dakila-Colt grew up in the Philippines. Her father was a concrete worker in Manila, and he put her through nursing school with one goal in mind: to escape the islands and make a better life for herself in the United States of America. That was a long time ago, and Juliet has been a Florida nurse for almost twenty years now. Before the shooting, she spoke with her father often, and her mother, and they always made it clear that they were very proud of her. Every two or three years, she flew to the PI to visit with them, and it was always a joyous occasion.

But now, stuck in this nightmare, in this dark and lonely prison, she wonders if she will ever hear their voices again. At least Nicholas is always nearby. Her soul mate, the love of her life. He comes every day, and his presence gives her the strength to go on, to fight against totally slipping into the abyss. If only she could talk. If only she could tell Nicholas, and everyone, that she is still aware of everything that goes on around her. It is so frustrating, not being able to move or speak. And the doctors, in and out all day and night, are saying there is very little hope that anything will ever change.

If she could only wake up. If she could only shout, at the top of her lungs, and let them know she is still here.

As a nurse, Juliet sometimes took care of patients who were in conditions similar to hers, and she wondered if they could hear her talking, if they could feel her touch. Now she knows that they could, at least some of them. She's happy that she always said nice things to them, just in case they were aware.

"Hello, Darling."

It's Nicholas. He's here now. Oh, how she wishes she could rise and embrace him. She would give the universe just to hold him in her arms one more time.

He touches her forehead. His hand is cool and dry. He strokes her hair with his fingertips.

"I'm going to be going away for a while," he says. "I don't want to, but I have to. I hope you understand. It's my job, and it's mandatory that I fulfill my duty. I'm so sorry. I'm going to miss you so much. And I'm so sorry about the times I wasn't around when you were well. There's no way to get that time back, but I regret that we were ever apart. Please forgive me, Juliet. If I could do it all over again, things would be different."

She wants to tell him that there is no need to apologize for anything. Their lives together hadn't been perfect, but whose ever is?

Juliet cherishes the memories of her time with Nicholas, and she longs to create even more memories with him.

Nicholas puts his hand on her belly, and, as if on cue, the baby kicks.

“Hello, my son,” Nicholas says. “It won’t be long now. I’ll be seeing you soon. Take good care of your mother while I’m gone, okay?”

Juliet feels a kiss on her cheek, and then she hears her husband’s footsteps fade as he exits the room.

She wants to scream for him to come back, but she cannot.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Circle's local safe house was a 1950s concrete bungalow nestled smack dab in the middle of nowhere. Colt had been there before, on the previous job he'd worked on with Diana. The closest neighbors were a mile away, the closest gas station five or more. Colt steered his Jimmy into the gravel driveway, killed the engine, got out and trotted up to the front door. He was a few minutes late, and he knew he would be scolded for it. He punched in the code on the electronic lock and walked inside.

The entire place was decorated in a style some people might call eclectic, or thrift-store chic. Colt called it dumpster deco. There was a ratty green sofa heavily pocked with cigarette burns, the fabric on the cushions worn so thin you could see the foam rubber in places. A brass floor lamp with no shade bathed the room in headache-white, and a fat palmetto bug scurried across a coffee table that had been fashioned from milk crates and a closet door. Colt walked into the kitchen, opened the avocado-green refrigerator, grabbed a bottle of the cheap light beer that always seemed to be stocked there, and twisted off the cap.

"Where have you been?" Diana asked.

She was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and a laptop computer. She wore black cargo pants and a black tank top. Five-six or five-seven, very fit, hair the color of chestnuts tied in a ponytail. There was a leather jacket and a backpack on the chair next to her, everything black.

"I had some things I needed to do," Colt said. He looked at his watch. "I'm seven minutes late. So sue me."

"I'm not going to sue you, but I might give you seven lashes with a wet noodle. Or maybe a horse whip. One lash for each minute. Try to be on time from now on, okay? You know how I feel about that. Seconds can mean the difference between life and death sometimes."

"I'll try," Colt said. He took a sip of the watered-down brew. "I'll make you a deal. I'll start being ten minutes early for everything if you start buying some better beer."

"Sit down," she said. "You better enjoy that bottle of beer, because you won't be getting any more after we leave here. There's no alcohol where we're going."

Colt sat across from her.

"Where are we going?" he said. "Hell? Come to think of it, you can probably get a cheap bottle of wine down there. Of course, there's no way to chill it."

Colt couldn't refrain from making the occasional wisecrack, even in his depressed state. It was a kind of defense mechanism, one that kept him from going completely bonkers.

"Sycamore Bluff is totally dry," Diana said. "That's part of the experiment. No alcohol, no mind-altering drugs of any kind."

"Sounds boring," Colt said. "How long am I going to have to be there?"

"I'm hoping we'll only be there a few days, but it could be longer. It depends on how fast we can figure out what's happening, and then how fast we can remedy the situation. We'll be going in as husband and wife, by the way, if you can imagine that. That's why I needed a male operative for this mission. Here's everything you'll need for identification purposes."

She pushed a brown nine-by-twelve envelope across the table. Colt picked it up and dumped out the contents.

"So I'm a twenty-six-year-old black guy now?" he said.

"What?"

Colt winked. "Just kidding."

Diana smiled. She had a nice smile. She needed to display it more often.

"Cute," she said. "Actually, it wouldn't be the first time there was a mix-up with credentials."

"Husband and wife," Colt said. "I hope you don't expect me to, you know, kiss you or anything."

"Don't be ridiculous. There will be absolutely no need to carry the charade that far. All we'll have to do is put on a good show out in public."

"Well, I'm about fifteen years older than you, but I guess that's not too much of a stretch. I see couples with wider age differences all the time. So what's the deal? You never told me why we're going in there in the first place."

"There was a murder-suicide a couple of weeks ago, a very gruesome killing right on Main Street in broad daylight. Apparently, a man in a car, guy named Kyle Lofton, nearly hit a woman on a bicycle. When he got out to see about her, he ended up biting her neck and killing her."

"Like a vampire," Colt said.

"Actually, he nearly decapitated her. Bits of the woman's skin and trachea and throat muscles were found in his stomach during the autopsy. He'd taken the time to chew the flesh and swallow it."

"And then he killed himself?"

"Yeah. He broke a Pepsi bottle and slit his own wrists. He bled out in the gutter while a crowd of people stood around and watched."

"Didn't anyone at least dial nine-one-one?"

“Nope. It was almost as if nobody could acknowledge that something had gone terribly wrong, that a major crime had been committed. That’s another thing we’re going to be looking at. The behavior of the townspeople. Odd, to say the least. Up until now, there has been no official law enforcement in Sycamore Bluff, but the agency running the show is wondering if that might need to change. Or, worse case scenario, if maybe the entire study should be aborted early.”

“What agency?”

“NASA,” Diana said. She explained the nature of the experiment.

“I’m still confused,” Colt said. “Why would The Circle want to get involved in anything like this?”

“After an initial investigation, NASA discovered that the killer had former ties with a group of rebels down in Central America. Well, they call themselves rebels. They’re actually a highly organized drug cartel with ties to the international sex trade. And rumor has it they’ve recently expanded into the production and distribution of illegal films. Normally, this kind of incident with a guy like Kyle Lofton wouldn’t have raised so many red flags, but this particular cartel has gained quite a bit of power over the past few years and their leader has remained untouchable. They make a lot of money from the United States, but they hate our government and our way of life. They’ve been connected to several attempted terrorist attacks. All the residents of Sycamore Bluff were screened before being admitted to the experiment, but this Kyle Lofton fellow slipped through the cracks somehow. Anyway, The Circle wants to make sure he didn’t poison the soup, so to speak. They want us to go in and investigate, try to find out what went wrong with NASA’s little utopia.”

“Any thoughts on what did go wrong?” Colt asked.

“I’m betting it was just an isolated occurrence,” Di said. “I doubt if Lofton had tried to start any sort of anti-government movement in Sycamore Bluff. It shouldn’t take us long to find out. Then you can get back to your teaching business, and everything else you have going on. I’m sorry I had to drag you into this. Really. I know you have a lot on your plate right now.”

“It’s okay. This is what I signed up for, and I want you to know I’m on board a hundred percent.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” Di said.

A hundred percent, Colt thought, except for the alcohol thing. He was glad he’d thought to pack a jug of Old Fitzgerald in his suitcase. He got up and opened the refrigerator and grabbed another beer. *This* was the last one he was going to get for a while, because it was the last one in the house.

“What else do I need to know?” he said.

"I'll fill you in on everything else en route. We'll be flying out of Jacksonville International Airport on a private jet at midnight, a direct flight to the Grissom Air Reserve Base near Kokomo. From there, we'll take a helicopter to Sycamore Bluff. This assignment should be a lot easier than the last one we did together, by the way."

"Why do you say that?"

"The Director thinks I need a break, so he gave me a cushy assignment. It was either this or a desk job."

"Do you need a break?" Colt asked.

"He took me off the big case I was working on because of, well, because of some personal reasons. I was on administrative leave for a while, and then I had to go through some rigorous mental and physical training exercises before returning to duty. I screwed up on one of the field exercises and got myself killed. It was a fluke. I just happened to run right into an enemy soldier as I was running through the woods. The odds of that happening were about the same as being struck by lightning. It wasn't my fault. It could have happened to anybody. So to answer your question, no, I don't need a break. I'm as sharp as I ever was."

"I hope so," Colt said. "I would hate to be sent into a hostile environment with a has-been."

She looked at him, and he winked again. She didn't smile this time.

CHAPTER FIVE

At approximately ten-thirty p.m.—22:30 military time—Lieutenant Colonel David A. Davidson, second in command at the Grissom Air Reserve Base, poured himself another glass of single malt scotch whisky and stared into the blank computer screen in front of him. He was at home, and Mrs. Davidson had already retired for the evening. Colonel Blankenbaker, the commanding officer of the base, was on leave for the next two weeks, so for the time being the buck stopped with Davidson.

He did his best thinking alone here in his study, late at night when the house was quiet. It was a comfortable space, with bookshelves and leather furniture and a fireplace. It was warm and cozy, and when he went in there and closed the door, the rest of the world knew not to bother him.

The colonel had made a decision. He knew what he had to do. He was just trying to work up the nerve to make the call. Those idiots from The Circle would be flying in soon, and he couldn't afford to wait much longer.

He'd thought about just going with the flow, and allowing the chips to fall where they may. It was an option, albeit a risky one. But if things didn't go right, if the operatives from The Circle discovered what was going on behind the scenes in Sycamore Bluff, it would cost him his career. And millions of dollars. And possibly even prison time. He couldn't afford to take the chance. Not when he and his associates were so close to success.

He picked up his cell phone and punched in the number. Major Philip H. Needleman answered on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Phil, this is Dave. We have a situation."

"What's up?"

"I can't discuss it over the phone. Meet me at the tower in thirty minutes. And bring your gear. You're flying tonight."

"Thirty minutes. I—"

"Just do it," Colonel Davidson said.

He hung up, took one last sip from his glass of scotch, grabbed his uniform jacket and his hat and headed out into the night.

The flight control tower was only a fifteen minute walk from Colonel Davidson's house, and the brisk January air would help clear his head. He hated what he was about to do, absolutely hated it. But sacrifices had to be made sometimes, and this one would definitely be worth it in the long run. Not only for Colonel Davidson and his

associates, but for humanity itself. They'd come so far, and now a single tiny glitch threatened to bring everything tumbling down. He just couldn't allow that to happen.

An airman first class stood guard at the control tower door. The young man popped to attention and saluted as Colonel Davidson approached.

"Good evening, sir," the airman said.

Davidson returned the salute, opened the door and walked inside. There were two offices on the ground floor, one marked *CO* for commanding officer, and the other marked *XO* for executive officer. Davidson unlocked the one marked *XO*, switched the light on, and took a seat at the desk. He could see the runway from his window, and at the moment a pair of F-15Es were doing touch-and-go's. Such a beautiful aircraft, he thought, and one he'd flown many missions in himself.

Davidson had served as a jet pilot in Iraq and Afghanistan, and had risen through the ranks more swiftly than most. At thirty-seven, he was one of the youngest Lieutenant Colonels in the entire United States Air Force. He expected to make full-bird and get his own command before his fortieth birthday, which was practically unheard of. He drew a nice paycheck, and would have a nice pension when the time came, but not nice enough for the things he wanted to do.

Colonel David A. Davidson wanted to fly his own private jet to Paris for the weekend. He wanted to cruise the Caribbean on his own private yacht. He wanted oceanfront property on both coasts, and a horse ranch in Wyoming. If he needed the company of a young lady for the evening, he wanted to be able to afford the best. He wanted servants attending to his every need 24/7. In short, Colonel Davidson wanted to be a billionaire, and come hell or high water, that was exactly what he was going to do.

Someone knocked on the door, and Davidson said, "Enter."

Major Needleman walked in.

Davidson and Needleman had been friends for years. Both of them were aviation hotshots, Davidson with F-15Es and Needleman with HH-60 Pave-Hawk helicopters, and both were career officers with pipelines geared toward senior management. They had been selected for a staff, operations, and planning tour with the Joint Special Operations Command around the same time, and that's where they had first met. Currently, Needleman was the base operations manager at Grissom, and he occasionally filled in when Davidson or Blankenbaker needed a helicopter pilot.

Needleman was up for promotion, and soon he and Davidson would be equal in rank. Even so, Davidson's position as executive officer would still allow him to give orders to Needleman in an official

capacity. They were friends, and they addressed each other casually in private, but Needleman knew his place in the pecking order.

“Good evening, Dave,” Needleman said. “What’s going on?”

“Shut the door.”

Needleman shut the door, removed his jacket, and took a seat across the desk from the colonel.

Needleman was a year older than Davidson, but nobody would have guessed that. He was five-nine with blue eyes and blond hair and a body kept fit from two hours of PT every morning. He was the kind of pilot who could walk into a bar anywhere in the world and have his pick of the hottest chicks in the joint.

Needleman settled into his chair. “You don’t look so good,” he said.

“I don’t feel so good. I got word a while ago that some agents are coming in to investigate the incident at Sycamore Bluff.”

“What agents?”

“This is top secret,” Davidson said. “So I don’t want you breathing a word of it to anyone. Ever. Understand?”

“Of course.”

“There’s a secret government agency called The Circle. Only a few people in the world know they exist. Until recently, I didn’t even know. They’re totally clandestine, the kind of outfit conspiracy theorists create rumors about. They’re in charge of investigating and eliminating any person or group who poses a threat to the country. Especially, but not limited to, any person or group intending to assassinate the president. Supposedly, they’ve prevented four assassination attempts during this administration alone.”

“Impressive,” Needleman said. “Why are they going to Sycamore Bluff?”

“That idiot who killed the woman and then killed himself was briefly involved with a crime cartel down in Central America.”

“Kyle Lofton,” Needleman said.

“Yeah. He generated a little blip on The Circle’s radar, and they want to rule out the possibility that he started some sort of movement among the other residents. He didn’t, and I’m sure it will only take them a day or two to figure out he didn’t, but we obviously can’t afford for anyone to be snooping around right now. Not when we’re this close to launching the product.”

“I see your point,” Needleman said. “So what do you want to do?”

“They’re going to be landing here in a couple of hours. From here, they’ll be taking the Huey to Sycamore Bluff. Baker was scheduled to pilot the copter, but I’m going to take him off it and put you in his place.”

“And?”

“I want you to make sure that helicopter never reaches its

destination.”

This concludes the sample chapters. If you would like to finish the entire novel, [SYCAMORE BLUFF](#) is now available for purchase.

Thanks again, and happy reading!
Jude

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE	
CHAPTER TWO	
CHAPTER THREE	
CHAPTER FOUR	
CHAPTER FIVE	
CHAPTER SIX	
CHAPTER SEVEN	
CHAPTER EIGHT	
CHAPTER NINE	
CHAPTER TEN	
CHAPTER ELEVEN	
CHAPTER TWELVE	
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	
CHAPTER NINETEEN	
CHAPTER TWENTY	
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN	
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT	
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE	
CHAPTER THIRTY	
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE	
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO	
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE	
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR	
Excerpt: SYCAMORE BLUFF	